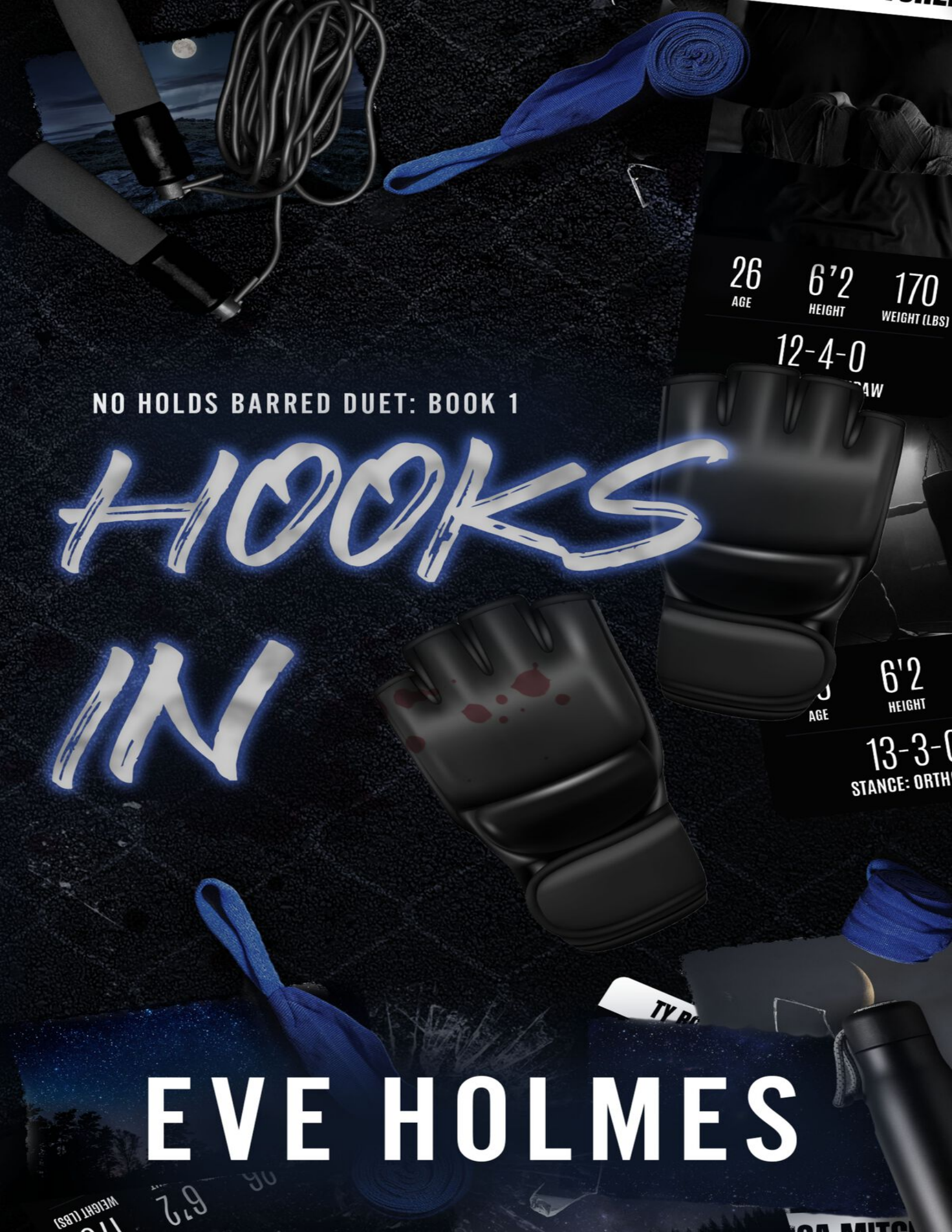

NO HOLDS BARRED DUET: BOOK 1

HOOKS IN

EVE HOLMES

Hooks In

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HOOKS IN

NO HOLDS BARRED
BOOK 1

EVE HOLMES

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For those who hate someone so much, you love them.

It's weird, but it happens.

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Thank you
Glossary
Also by Eve Holmes
About the Author

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BEFORE WE BEGIN

Hooks In is an MM romance, and is book 1 in the No Holds Barred duet. We end on a HFN in this book (no cliff-hanger!) and book 2 will continue Ty and Luca's story, ending with an HEA.

Ty and Luca are sassy, snarky, and full of hate for each other. Until that hate becomes something else… But this story is about growth and acceptance, and these boys will learn a lot from each other.

They are both MMA fighters, and the sport plays a large role in this book. Various submissions, positions, and other MMA terms used throughout this story are defined in a glossary in the back of the book, if you wish to review or expand your knowledge. However, a thorough understanding of these terms is not necessary to enjoy this story.

There is some content in this book that may be unsettling to some, so please review the following content warnings:

- Blood and fighting within the sport of MMA
- Mention of past drug use
- Explicit sex scenes

I hope you love Ty and Luca!

Eve xo

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ONE

MY OPPONENT'S heel lands on my ribs as he completes a spinning back kick, and I curse to myself. Not only from the pain shooting through my side, but because I should have seen that coming. I know exactly who I'm fighting, and I know his strength is in Muay Thai. Which means I need to get this fucker to the ground. While he would rather keep this fight standing, I know that when I get him to the octagon floor, *I* have the advantage. And he knows this too.

I step sideways as he brings his knee up to the same spot on my ribs, but he misses. Before he can reposition himself, I duck to bring my head under his arm. And as I wrap my arm around his leg, I can feel him stiffen to fight off the takedown. But I pull his leg up, and he goes right down to the ground. The sound of his back hitting the padded canvas of the octagon floor is almost drowned out by the cheer from the crowd, and a thrill shoots through me. I straddle his hips and attempt a hit to the side of his head, but he blocks my fist with his arm.

Perfect.

My hand immediately finds the back of his arm, pulling it across his chest as I press my upper body against him to keep him here. And if I can finish this move, I'll have him. But I also know this guy beneath me. And in every fight against him, he escapes at least one of my holds. Luca Mitchell is a nimble motherfucker. And that's one of the many things I hate about him.

Just as I expected, he raises his hips in an attempt to unbalance me and turn out of my hold on him. But I'm one step ahead.

I blink away the sweat dripping into my eye and feel the swelling from his hit on my face earlier. But I don't care, because I'm so close. This will be over in one more move.

Or maybe I do care a bit, because I elbow the side of his head for good measure as I tuck my arm under his neck. The grunt that escapes him is music to my ears.

I move quickly, shifting to the side and wrapping my legs around his upper torso, pulling his arm back. Luca grunts again, and I zero in on the feel of his outstretched arm in my grasp as I have him in an armbar. The cheers from the crowd fade away as my entire focus shifts to finishing this. Because I *have* to win. This fight is my ticket out of here.

My breath is loud in my ears and my muscles strain as I hold his outstretched arm tight to my chest. Then I pull his arm harder, and I wait. He'll tap out soon. He has to. Because this has got to fucking hurt.

He tries to turn his body to move out of my hold, but he can't.

I got him.

And he taps.

As I release him and jump to my feet, a deep breath fills my lungs. My eyes close, my head tilts back, and I bring my hands to my swelling face.

Fuck. Yes.

The cheers from the crowd rush in as my focus returns to the arena, and I scan the rows of people through the cage walls. Most of them are out of their seats as they jump and cheer, while others are still sitting and murmuring their displeasure. But fuck those people, they came to *my* town. And *I* beat their golden boy.

My eyes finally find who I'm looking for as they land on Max Fairburn. A retired UFC fighter, who is opening a brand-new training gym in his hometown of St. Louis. Which is just a few hours from this shitty town that I am so desperate to get out of. He is building a team of fighters from all over the world, and I've been tracking what he's built so far. I've heard he only has one spot left to fill, and he's here tonight to find a local fighter to bring to his gym. And I know he wants a welterweight.

I'm a welterweight.

And I just won.

Max is standing, arms crossed over his chest with an approving and thoughtful nod towards the octagon. I take another deep breath and tear my

gaze away from him. I just beat my only real competition here, so I know I have a chance.

As I look towards my battered opponent in his corner, I let the relief take over for a moment. Luca Mitchell is the only person who stood in my way of this opportunity. As we are both welterweights and live in neighbouring counties, we fight often. And we're constantly battling for the top spot in regional rankings, as we've evenly held the first and second spots for years. But tonight, I move into first, while he drops to second.

Luca grabs a towel from one of the guys in his corner and wipes his face, but I stay right where I am. Sweat drips down my forehead and stings a cut over my eyebrow, but it can wait. This moment is too important. Energy buzzes inside me at the thought of making Max's team, and taking the next step on my path to the Ultimate Fighting Championship.

The referee grabs my wrist, and calls Luca to the middle of the octagon. As he walks over to us, he keeps his head down and his jaw tight. A satisfied smirk graces my lips as I take in the swelling and bruising beginning over his eye. His messy, dirty blonde curls are drenched in sweat, and he looks exhausted.

Good.

"And the winner, by submission, is Tyler Roscoe!" the ref announces as he lifts my arm in the air.

My hometown crowd erupts in cheers, and I once again slide my gaze to Max Fairburn. He's still watching with that same approving look. That's got to be a good sign.

And because I need one more look at how badly I've put Luca Mitchell in his place, I bring my eyes back to him. He is still seething as he keeps his eyes cast down, and now I feel fucking fantastic.

But then he looks up at me, and smirks.

The ref lowers my arm and lets go of us, but Luca keeps that smug looking smirk in place as his eyes roam over my face. Like *he's* proud of what he did to *me.*

I swallow tightly and keep staring back at him, tightening my fists at my sides. I'm about to step into him and put him *back* in his fucking place when a hand lands on my shoulder. I turn my head to see Evan from my corner.

"Come on, man. Let it go," he says, gesturing with his head for me to exit the cage, where the rest of the guys from my gym are waiting.

I glance back at Luca, and he chuckles with a fucking *smile*. He then turns and leaves the cage.

I seriously hate that guy.

But I won. And if I can get out of here, and go train with Max in his gym, I'll never have to see him again.

Leaving that bastard behind will be the best feeling of all.

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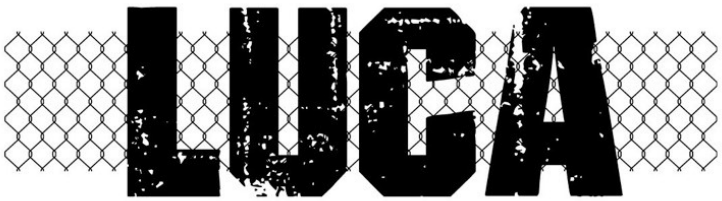
TWO



"FUCK!"

I slam the door to my dressing room and rip my gloves off.

"Easy, man, it was close-"

I whirl around to face Drew. "Exactly, it was so fucking close!" I blow out a breath and shake my head. "If I didn't block his lazy ass punch to my face, I could have got him off me. I could have taken that hit and been *fine*." I throw my gloves against the wall and run my hands through my hair.

Drew pushes my shoulder to get to me to sit on the bench and brings a wet rag to my face. He remains quiet, as usual, as he cleans the blood from a cut on my forehead. In the fourteen years he's been my coach, he's come to know me a bit too well. He's always said that even from day one, as a twelve-year-old in kickboxing, I was a "*little shit*", and he knew not to feed into my "*attitude*".

I give him the stink eye as he continues to silently clean my face. I mean, yeah, smart man… I wouldn't want to listen to me either. But also… rude. I think I deserve at least an "*I know man!*" Or a "*Yeah, fuck him!*"

"Now he's first in rankings," I murmur as I wince from the sting of whatever he's pressing against my face. I can feel the swelling, and I know a black eye is forming.

"It's just ice, hold this," Drew says, and I lift my hand to hold the ice pack to the side of my face. "It's one fight, you'll get the-"

"The next one?" I ask. "No, there won't *be* a next one with him. Max Fairburn is here, did you forget that?" I stare at him, and he just stares back at me. I sigh. "Sorry, dude. I'm just pretty fucking pissed off…"

“I get it. I would be too.” Drew sits on the chair across from me. “Nothing you can do about it now though.”

I glare at him. “Gee, thanks. Such support.”

He shrugs and throws a towel at me. “I’m not going to baby you. Brush it off and do better next time. You know what went wrong, so don’t let it happen again.” He stands and gestures to my bag beside me. “Now get changed and meet us out there, we’re going to go drink when we get back to Warsaw.”

“Sounds perfect,” I mumble, as I wipe the towel over my damp hair. Even though the smarter choice would be to just go home to an ice bath and sleep, a beer sounds fucking *delightful* right about now.

He closes the door as he heads into the hallway, and I tip my head back against the cold concrete wall. *Motherfucking Ty Roscoe.* That piece of shit. I *had* him. I was number one, and one stupid mistake let him take it from me. And now, he’ll likely be chosen by Max for the spot at his new training gym in St. Louis.

“Argh!” I throw the ice pack and watch it slide across the floor, slamming into the wall. But then I go pick it up with a sigh. The ice pack didn’t fuck up, it doesn’t deserve that.

I grab a quick shower and pull on my clothes, avoiding the mirror. It’s only going to get worse… No sense in looking at the damage now. As I leave the room, I spot the guys from my gym at the end of the hallway and make my way towards them. Some of them fought earlier tonight and I’m sure, just like I am, they’re all ready to get out of here and make the drive home. But as I get closer, I notice they’re chatting with some other guys… from Ty’s gym.

“Hey, Luca, nice job,” one of them says with a smile, and I hate that it’s genuine. I’d like to hate these guys as much as I hate Ty, but they’ve always been nice to me. It would be easier if they weren’t, as I just can’t be mean for the sake of being mean. I tried, but it felt gross.

“Thanks, man,” I say as he reaches out to smack my outstretched hand.

“You guys fighting in Camden next month?” Mark, from my gym, asks them.

I turn my head to glare at him. Not even an hour post loss, and we’re already bringing up a fight that I’m *not* supposed to be fighting in. Because I *should* be heading to St. Louis. Well, guess now I will be in Camden…

I glance towards the empty octagon in the middle of the arena, and watch as the last of the spectators leave. The guys all continue chatting about the fight next month, and I'm trying real hard not to get too salty about it.

But the anger is bubbling, as it all settles. I lost. I won't be going to St. Louis. And who knows when I'll have another opportunity like this again. I watch as everyone smiles and chats like they don't have a care in the world, and I find myself scowling at one of the guys from Ty's gym. He gives me a weird half smile before quickly looking away from me, and then I immediately feel bad. I'm being a dick. I'm hardcore in my feels right now, but *they* didn't put me here. Their asshole friend did. Which means I hate that they are friends with him because they *are* really nice. Fuck, this is confusing.

A door opens down the hall, and I turn my head to see Ty step out of it.

I keep watching him as he makes his way towards us, and he glares at me the whole way. So, I smile at him. But not a friendly smile. Oh, no, he never gets those. It's an *I know how to fuck with you* smile that I crafted just for him. And it works, as it pisses him off 100% of the time.

He hates it.

I love it.

His eyes darken as he approaches us and that makes me happy. For a moment.

"Congrats, Ty," Drew says, and I roll my eyes as I huff out a breath.

Ty's jaw ticks.

Oh, fun. I roll them again.

He narrows his eyes in my direction. "Something you want to say to me, Mitchell?"

I shrug my shoulders and shake my head. "I don't think so." I smile at him again.

"What the fuck is your problem?" he says, stepping towards me. One of his guys places a hand on his chest to stop him.

I shrug again. "Clearly it's you. I thought that was obvious."

Ty drops his bag and pushes his guy's hand away, stepping closer. I drop my bag too and laugh, which only pisses him off more as his eyes flash. *Awesome*.

Drew steps between us and places a hand on my shoulder, while Ty's guy does the same to him again. I keep my smile in place as he's wrangled

back by his team. But he continues to stare at me, seething.

"Alright, let's go. Fights are over," one of his guys says, patting his chest.

Ty's lips tilt up at the corner as he picks his bag up. "Yeah. It's going to stay that way too."

Anger rushes through me again. Because that's likely true. Max is going to want him since he won, so I don't know if I'll ever fight him again. And as much as I'd never like to see his smug fucking face again, I hate that this is ending with a loss against him.

I want to launch myself at him, and end this with a true beating right here in this hallway. But I'm classier than that. So, I pick up my bag and give him a playful smirk and a wink.

His brows draw together before he quickly adopts his signature scowl again.

Oh Roscoe, I know just how to get in your head.

I turn towards the exit and try not to let disappointment completely take over me.

I almost had it… I almost won.

Now, that beer doesn't only sound delightful, it's a fucking necessity.

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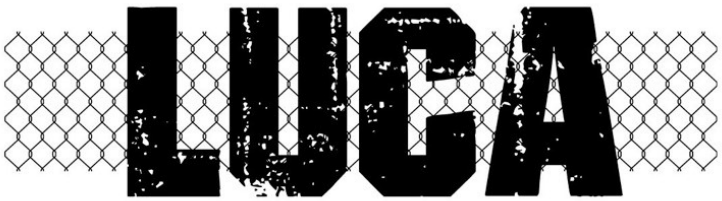
THREE



MONDAY MORNINGS SUCK on a good day. But after a shitty weekend, it's pretty much the worst thing ever. I've considered calling in sick a couple times this morning, as I drag my ass around getting ready for work, but I can't do that. Not only because I would feel guilty for lying, as I'm not actually sick, but staying home would feel like I'm giving Ty another win.

And like hell he's going to make me mope.

Even though that's exactly what I'm doing, as I just stand here in the shower and let the hot water run over my face. Wallowing in my own self-pity.

Eventually, I get out of the shower and try to shake it all off. Except I get another little reminder of my situation as I step up to the mirror, wiping the steam away to see my black eye staring back at me. I lean in to inspect it, as the swelling is pretty much gone now. But there's some heavy bruising, which will be fun for work.

By the time I'm downstairs making coffee, I feel a bit better. I love my job, so hopefully a good day at work will help get my mind off what I lost this weekend.

"Hey, Luca."

I look up from scrolling my phone while I wait for my coffee to brew, to see Alexis enter the kitchen.

"Morning." I smile at her, and she reaches into the cupboard to grab a bowl.

"I'm making pancakes. Want some?" she asks.

I shake my head, grabbing my travel mug and pouring coffee into it. "Wish I could, but I need to head out now."

And I really do wish I could. Alexis makes *sick* pancakes. Last time she put bananas, chocolate chips *and* peanut butter in them. I ate them for like a week straight. It's a good thing she practically lives here now since she and my roommate, Harrison, have become quite serious. And must I say, he did good. Not only because of the pancake thing, she's also hot. I take a sneaky little glance as she reaches up to the cupboard, and Harrison's t-shirt rides up just enough to show the bottom of her underwear.

"More for me," Harrison says, entering the kitchen and wrapping his arms around Alexis' waist.

Speaking of hot… I subtly check out Harrison's ass as well on my way to the fridge for coffee cream. Dude has a great ass, and he knows it. But sadly, he's not into dick. Found that out the hard way when I tried to pick him up in a bar. He said he was straight, we laughed about it, drank, found out we both needed roommates, and the rest is history. He's a cool guy and a sick roommate, so I guess it all worked out for the best. Plus, that whole don't fuck where you sleep thing. Wait, no, that's not right. You *would* fuck where you sleep… Whatever, it all worked out.

"Well, you guys have a good day," I say as I grab my keys and head towards the door.

"See ya!" Harrison calls from the kitchen, and I hear Alexis giggling as she makes pancakes while he kisses her neck. *Ah*, *young love*.

I hop into my Jeep and turn the heat on, as the November air is turning chilly. While I wait for my Jeep to warm up, I scroll through my phone to find some tunes that will improve my mood and set the tone for, hopefully, a good day. My lips tilt up in a smile as I land on nineties rock. If that doesn't help even a little bit, then I really should have called in sick.

By the time I pull into the parking lot at work, rocking out to *Two Princes* by The Spin Doctors, I feel like I can push my sorrowful feelings away and just enjoy the day. And as I make my way towards the school, my mood lifts even more as some of the kids wave to me from the playground.

"Mr. Mitchell!" one of the boys, Emerson, calls to me after sliding down the slide. "What happened??"

"Did you get in a fight?" another boy asks.

One of the girls shakes her head. "He fights in a cage!"

"You do??" Emerson asks with wide eyes.

I chuckle, shifting my backpack on my shoulder, while cautiously glancing at the teacher supervising the playground this morning. Mrs.

Wentzel is a hardass and is *not* my biggest fan. Not only because I've come to work with a black eye a few times, but she also doesn't believe that teaching Physical Education makes me a real teacher. But she should have retired like twenty years ago, so her opinions are outdated. She gives me a disapproving look and I turn my attention back to the kids.

"Yeah, I do fight in a cage. But it's a sport, so not a bad fight. And no," I say as Emerson opens his mouth to ask a question, "we're not doing it in Phys. Ed."

"Aw, man!" He throws his hands in the air, pulling a laugh from me.

"See you soon," I say, turning away to head into the school and get the gym set up for the day. I have his class third period, so I'm sure there will be a lot more questions.

Just as I reach the gym, I hear footsteps behind me.

"Luca!"

I stop and close my eyes for a moment, before slapping on a smile and turning around to face the principal of the school.

She sighs as her eyes roam over my face. "I hope you have a plausible explanation for the kids."

I shrug and take a sip of my coffee. "Sport."

She raises her eyebrows. "And what is that teaching them?"

"That a bump and bruise is not the end of the world, and avoiding passions to live in a bubble of complete safety is not real life?" I smile sweetly at her.

She shakes her head slightly, but I see a small smile tugging at the corner of her lips. "I'll never understand this sport." She turns to leave, but glances over her shoulder. "And from what I hear, you did a good job. So, congrats."

I offer her a weak smile with a thanks and turn to push the gym door open. There goes my mood again. *Congrats.* For what? I know she's just being nice and doesn't know any better, but damn. Ouch.

The frustration and sadness nags at me as I flop into the chair in my office, and check my e-mails. And no matter what I do, it just keeps seeping in, reminding me that I lost my chance at my dream this weekend.

I look out into the gym and sigh. I love this job. I love teaching. But I was ready to make the move. From the first day I learned what MMA was, I have been working towards fighting in the UFC. And the next step to make

that happen is to train with a professional fighter and coach in an elite training gym.

It was in the palm of my fucking hand.

And now what? Now what am I working towards? I know I can still achieve this goal in time, but it just pisses me off that *Ty fucking Roscoe* is going to be a step ahead. While I'm still here…

"Whatever," I murmur to myself as I push out of my chair and make my way to the equipment room to set up for the first class. We're going old school today, completely in line with my nineties rock. We're playing dodgeball.

Usually, I would be in the staff room right now, hanging out with everyone before school starts. But I just can't do it this morning. And I know one of the other teachers, Andy, is going to be looking for me later. He went to the fight, so he'll want to talk about it. And I *don't* want to talk about it.

Once everything is set up and I'm back in the office, I hear the first class coming down the hallway towards the gym. I take a deep breath in and blow it out, ready to put on a happy face for the kids.

Just as I'm about to head into the gym, my phone starts buzzing on the desk, and I sigh. It's probably Andy wondering why I didn't go up to the staff room. But as I look down at the phone number on my screen, it's an unknown caller with a St. Louis area code.

My heart rate spikes as I continue to stare down at it.

No way. It can't be…

As the kids' voices get closer, I slowly slide my thumb across the screen and bring the phone to my ear.

"Hello?"

"Yo, buddy! Look at that shiner… nice and purple."

I hold up my middle finger for Aaron as he punches the heavy bag with a laugh. I head over to a bench at the far end of the gym and drop my backpack, pulling off my shirt and getting ready to roll. I've been looking

forward to this all day. I've known I need to tighten up my grappling, but after losing to an armbar this weekend, I'm eager to get started on this *now.*

Drew eyes me from across the gym and makes his way over. "How are you holding up?"

I shrug and kick my shoes off. "Best as can be given the circumstances."

He nods and pats my shoulder. "Well, let's work on changing those."

I nod back at him solemnly. "What if they already have?" And I can't keep it in any longer as my face breaks out in a huge smile.

He stares back at me for a moment before he lets out a breath of laughter. "No fucking way."

My smile widens. "Max called this morning. I'm in."

"No fucking way!" Aaron drops his gloves and stares at me from the middle of the gym, pulling everyone else's attention to us as well. "Seriously?"

I nod. "Seriously."

"What about Ty?" Sam asks as he approaches me.

"What about him?" I ask, my smile quickly falling. "Who fucking cares. Max said he likes the way I fight, so I guess it didn't matter who won." I raise my finger and point it at Drew. "See, I *knew* I fought better than him."

He chuckles, batting my finger away. "You earned it. So, when do you leave?"

"Two weeks." I glance around to everyone in the gym as they listen in. "I have to give my notice at work."

"In-fucking-sane. Insane." Aaron shakes his head.

Sam punches my arm. "Dude, that's *so* awesome. Fuck rolling, let's go get a drink!"

Drew huffs a laugh and shakes his head, pushing Sam away. "Lucky for you dickheads, I have beer in the fridge. Roll first, then drink. I only have a couple weeks left to push Luca around and tell him what to do, and I want to make the most of it."

I laugh, and gladly accept all the hugs and fist bumps from everyone.

As Sam and I head to the mats, I feel a new sadness creep in. While I'm pumped to be going to Max's gym, I'll be sad to leave this one. It's home. It's where I spend almost every evening and weekend, training with friends and teaching kids Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu and kickboxing.

To leave this gym and my job is going to be hard. I've worked hard to get where I am, finally landing a permanent contract at my school and building a tight community in training and teaching at the gym. I love being a part of all of it. It's a lot to give up… but this is what I want. I want to fight in the UFC, and this is what I need to do to get there. If Max Fairburn thinks I have a shot, then I have to do it.

So, I'm fucking doing it.

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FOUR

MY PHONE BUZZES in my pocket, but I leave it there. I haven't looked at it all day, and I'm not going to now. Instead, I continue to stand in the middle of my living room and stare down at the armchair in the corner, which is staying here with all the other furniture in this apartment. Everything of mine worth taking with me to St. Louis is packed in my car, and I am ready to leave tonight. Even though I told everyone I was leaving tomorrow. But I just can't stay in this apartment any longer.

However, I just keep standing here…

I let out a huge sigh and cross my arms. I've always hated this fucking chair. It's butt ugly and looks like it's straight out of the seventies with green and orange flowers on it. It's seriously the most hideous thing I've ever seen. But my brother loves it, so we kept it. And for some reason, I hung onto it even after he went to prison seven years ago. But the next person to rent this apartment wants it furnished, so I've donated all of our furniture to the landlord to make that happen. Chair included. At least it's going to kind of a good cause… my brother fucking stole it all anyway.

I let my eyes wander around the apartment, surprised by how good I'm feeling about this. I guess it's a fresh start, as I can now, finally, leave everything behind. Trevor raised me here, and after he was arrested, I couldn't make myself move out. I felt some weird sort of duty to keep it for him. Or us. But he's never coming back here. Drug charges are steep, and he just keeps fucking up in there and extending his stay.

As I stare at the chair again, I let one final rush of anger take over. Living here, with this fucking chair, has been a constant reminder of just how much of a fuck up he really is. I was eighteen when he went in, and

now at the age of twenty-six, I see it clear as day. That nagging hope that he would come back, and we would live here together again, has faded over the years. And now it's just a dark void of disappointment.

But his sorry excuse for a life is the motivation I need to make sure mine doesn't end up the same way. As I watched him blow his life up, and throw it all away, I made a promise to myself to never end up like him. I was going to be successful and make something of myself. In MMA.

Ever since I started MMA as a teenager, my goal was to fight in the UFC, and each year since, that determination has only grown. To prove to myself that I am not, and will not be, a fuck up like my big brother. And now, my hard work has paid off.

When Max called me, and asked me to join his team in St. Louis, it felt like a leap in the right direction. And not the small steps I've been taking here on my own. He's going to help me be the best fighter I can be, and I will *not* fuck this up. I'm going to have access to some of the best training I can get so I can throw myself into this completely, and I can finally start fighting guys who bring me more of a challenge than Luca fucking Mitchell.

I finally tear my eyes away from the ugly ass chair as my phone continues to buzz with texts. I should have just turned it off. I wasn't going to look at any of these until I got to St. Louis, but fuck, they're coming in non-stop.

I scroll through the notifications from the day and cringe at the never-ending string of texts from Haley. I haven't purposefully seen or spoken to this girl in one month, and she thinks we're in a fucking relationship. One hookup, that's it, and she sunk her claws in. Deep.

HALEY

Hey, so you're leaving tomorrow *sad face emoji* how about I come spend the night with you and make your last night here one you'll never forget?

I'm sure you're busy, so just let me know when you're free tonight and I'll come over. No rush!

Or would you rather come here? My bed is pretty comfy *winky face emoji*

Should we do dinner first? You'll probably be hungry

Or I could bring dinner over, that's probably better. What do you think, pizza, pasta? I'll bring candles *heart emoji*

I close out her texts, not bothering to read any more. I haven't responded to a text of hers in literally a month and have only seen her because she hangs around the gym with one of the guys' girlfriends. She likes the idea of dating an MMA fighter, and I made the mistake of thinking she was hot and fucked her *once*. Then I actually spoke to her and regretted everything. I don't date, and she doesn't take no for an answer. It's a recipe for disaster. Plus, the sex was fucking awful anyway as all she did was lay there and moan like she was injured.

I continue scrolling though the texts, skimming messages from the other mechanics at the garage wishing me well and the guys from the gym blowing up a group chat I've never actually participated in. They were texting this afternoon, asking me to come train one last time with them this evening. Which I don't understand. We're not close. Well, they are, but I'm not close with them. They keep trying to get me to come out for drinks or to hockey games with them, but I always find an excuse not to. It's just easier and saves everyone from a really uncomfortable experience. I'm aware I come across as an asshole, but I'm not here to make friends. I have a goal to achieve, and my focus has paid off. So, I'm doing something right.

And everyone I've been close to has just left anyway, so why bother?

My eyes slide up to the corner of my phone screen. It's after 9:00 PM. It's too late to meet with them now even if I did want to. So I tap out a message to say thanks but I missed their texts, and I'll stop in next time I'm home. Even though that's not true. Because I won't be home. The only thing that kept me here was some kind of delusional loyalty to my brother, which is now lost. And this opportunity is the kick in the ass I needed to finally wrap up this show I've been putting on for the both of us, and move on without feeling like I am abandoning him. Even though he abandoned me.

I'm the only person I can count on, and I'm doing this for myself.

I head for the door and pause for a moment before opening it. But I don't look back. As I finally shut the door on my past, a rare feeling of pride runs through me.

I *am* doing the right thing.

This is fucking wild.

The gym is bright and airy, and I am at a loss for words at how incredible this place is. Max went all out when he built this place, as it is truly state of the art. There's a cage and a boxing ring in the middle of the gym, with rolling mats, speed bags, heavy bags, and pads and shields all around the perimeter. At the far end I see a weight training room, and there's even a running track.

"Ty Roscoe!"

I turn towards the voice to see Max making his way towards me with a big smile.

I reach my hand out with a smile in return as he approaches, grasping it in a firm handshake.

"You're here bright and early. When did you get into town?" he asks me.

"Late last night," I say, adjusting my bag on my shoulder.

He nods with an approving smile. "Barely even settled and already in the gym. I like it."

I chuckle. "Yeah, well, that's what I'm here for."

Max gestures around the gym. "Well, here it is. Your new home, Fairburn MMA." He pauses for a moment, observing me while I look around the space. "I think you're going to be a good addition to this team. You have a unique fighting style, just like everyone else here. You're gritty, but maintain control, especially when the fight is on the ground. You're calculated, and play the system, always aware of exactly where you stand within every second of every round. And you use the rules of the game to your advantage. I like that."

I give him a half smile, uncomfortable with the praise. But, appreciative. Especially coming from him.

"But," he puts his hands in his pockets and smirks at me, "there's always room for improvement. I want to see you strengthen your striking and footwork. And we're going to clean up your timing as well."

I nod eagerly. This is exactly what I want, and exactly what I need. “I agree. I’m here to learn everything you can teach me.”

He smiles. “Excellent. Everyone in this gym is going to learn from each other. We have a well-rounded team coming in, and we all have our strengths. There are some excellent kickboxers and boxers here who you will spar and train with often to work on these skills. One in particular I think you will learn a lot from, and spend quite a bit of time with. And, you’ll do the same with fighters who are looking to work on grappling.”

A smile spreads across my face. “Awesome.”

He tilts his head towards a few guys who are rolling on a mat close by, while others are working the bags and in the weight room. “We have one more guy coming and he should be here any minute now. But come meet the team.”

I start to follow him over to the mat, but hear the door to the gym open and close behind us.

Max looks over his shoulder, then smiles. “Ah, you made it!”

I turn my head to the door, assuming it’s the other guy he’s waiting on.

And I freeze.

Luca Mitchell is standing there, staring back at me.

What. The. Fuck.

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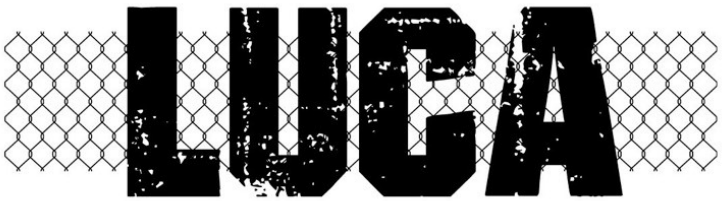
FIVE



WHAT. *The. Fuck.*

I can't be seeing what I'm seeing right now. Ty Roscoe is not here, in this gym, in St. Louis, with Max Fairburn. In *my* new gym, with *my* new coach. No, this isn't happening.

Max laughs lightly, but I sense his apprehension as Ty and I continue to stare at each other.

"You two already know each other, so no introductions needed," Max says through a chuckle, and he steps a little closer into the space between us.

I continue to stare back at Ty, while he glares at me. I can't even form a straight thought in my head right now. This was supposed to be my break. I was supposed to leave him behind. Max chose *me*. Why the fuck is he here?

"Um…" Max murmurs, as he glances between us. "I knew there was a bit of a rivalry between you two, but I take it it's not a healthy one like I thought?"

I shift my gaze to Max as he eyes me, and then Ty. Ty is still shooting daggers at me, and I see his chest rise and fall with a deep breath.

I don't even know what to say. I fucking hate this guy, and there's nothing *healthy* about how much I despise him. But I can't say this in front of Max. He clearly chose us both for his team, and he could easily send one of us away if our hatred for each other is a problem. And Ty *did* win our fight that Max came to see. So, if one of us had to go…

"Ok," Max steps closer and puts his hands up between us, "look. I get it, you've fought each other a lot. Being from neighboring counties with not a whole lot of competition out there, you've developed a… heated feud. I've

looked at your stats over the years, and you guys are neck and neck. It's why I brought you both here."

I look back at Ty and can't help the sneer I give him.

"Believe it or not," Max says, "you each have a fighting style that will complement each other in training."

My head whips to Max. "What?"

Max smirks. "I was just telling Ty that I want him to tighten up his striking, and that I have a striker on this team that will be a big help to him."

Ty finally pulls his glare off of me and gives Max a surprised look, pointing at me. "*Him?*"

I laugh, and Ty shoots me another dirty look. Fuck, I love getting under his skin. It just gives me the warm fuzzies. Especially because *I* have something *he* needs.

"*And,"* Max turns to me, "while you are highly skilled on your feet, *you* need work on the ground. As a skilled grappler, Ty can support you with this."

My smile immediately falls as I stare back at Max.

"We train as a team." Max looks between us. "We learn from each other. You want to be a complete, well-rounded fighter? You do what you need to do to learn, and accept the support from *everyone* in this gym. That's what it takes to be on this team."

I swallow hard and nod. I want to be on this team more than anything, and I want to be a complete fighter. Which means I need to be strong in both Muay Thai *and* Jiu-Jitsu.

Max looks at Ty, and he nods as well.

"So, you can both be here?" Max asks, and I turn my gaze back to my rival standing before me.

Anger is rising and threatening to take over, just being in the same space as him. And this will be my daily life now. I have to be in the same gym as him, training *with* him, every fucking day. Ty looks like he's ready to explode as he grips the strap of his bag tight and his jaw ticks. My own hands are squeezed tight at my sides, but I stretch my fingers out and take a deep breath in. I have no other choice. I either do this, or I leave.

And I am not leaving. He's not winning. I gave up everything at home to be here, and this is it. I am doing this. I need this.

"Yeah," I grit out, keeping my eyes on Ty.

Max looks at Ty expectantly, but he continues to scowl at me for a moment longer. He eventually turns his head to Max and nods. “Yeah.”

“Excellent.” Max smiles and crosses his arms, looking between us again. “You guys will be training together almost every day. So, hang up the metaphorical gloves. You’re teammates now.”

Everybody here is awesome. Well, all except one.

We all spent the morning getting to know each other, and Max has built a great team. There are fighters here from various parts of the world, and some of them I have heard of and have followed their careers so far. And every single person here is an elite quality fighter. Just thinking of the skill in this gym has me so excited to start training.

And besides the people, the facilities are unreal, with everything we could ever need. I am fucking pumped for this.

The only thing that would make it better is if Ty weren’t here.

He kept his distance from not only me, but everyone else, all morning. Training starts tomorrow, so we are just hanging out today to get to know each other and get settled in the gym, and it seems like he wants nothing to do with this. He just stands off to the side with his hands in his pockets, listening but not contributing anything to any conversation. He hasn’t even tried to get to know anyone here and, well, I actually like that. A lot. Maybe he’ll realize this isn’t for him and he’ll leave. It’s obvious the asshole isn’t a team player.

But right now, we’re all seated around the table in the kitchen eating lunch, and I’m trying to ignore his presence so I can just enjoy myself. But as we all chat, his brooding is distracting me.

Adão is talking about the MMA scene in São Paulo, where he’s from, and I love hearing all the stories of everyone’s training and fighting in different parts of the world.

“Did you grow up in São Paulo?” I ask Adão, as I take a bite of my pizza.

“Nope,” he says, shaking his head. “Tiny town not too far from there though. I moved into the city when I finished school so I could train. Not much going on in my town.”

“I hear you,” Rosa chuckles from her seat beside me. “Tzitzio, Mexico, is also not too well known for… well, anything.” She makes a face and I laugh. “I moved the second I could so I could find a gym.”

I nod with a smile. “I may have had a good gym and community in MMA, but small-town Missouri offers nothing else in comparison to Brazil or Mexico. I’ve actually always wanted to go to Brazil.”

Adão smiles at me. “Oh yeah? Why haven’t you?”

“Life just keeps getting in the way, and poor planning on my part.” I shrug. “I’m a teacher, so I can’t go during the school year, and then over the summer I end up working too much at the gym.”

“You wouldn’t want to go during your summer.” Adão shakes his head. “Best time to travel there is during your winter here.”

“Right, so *not* poor planning on my part, I’ve just been doomed with a terrible work schedule. At least I can use that as my excuse,” I say through a chuckle and everyone else laughs too.

“You able to keep teaching here?” Max asks.

I nod. “I was able to get on the substitute list with the school district. It’s hard to get a full-time position on a good day let alone in the middle of the school year. But I’m ok with just being a sub. There’s enough work, so I can pick and choose what days to go in. Plus it gives me more flexibility for time off when needed.”

Ty scoffs and my eyes dart to him, as his own eyes roll in annoyance. Every muscle in my body tenses as I glare at him and bite my tongue.

“So, Ty,” Noah says, glancing between us. “What about you, find work here?”

Noah tentatively watches Ty, and I can tell he is nervous about us. He seems like a timid kind of guy, which is surprising because I’ve seen a video of him fight before. Dude is fucking ruthless.

“Yeah, mechanics are in demand everywhere,” Ty responds, without even looking at Noah.

“Sick, what type of mechanic are you? Airplanes, autos, trains?” Sebastian asks with his lilting Irish accent.

“Auto and motorcycle.” Ty flashes a quick look around the table, then back down to his plate.

Max nods. “That’s awesome you could find work so quick. Full time, too?”

Ty looks at him and nods in response. His gaze then slides to me. “Not all of us are here on vacation.”

I set my drink down and huff out an unamused laugh. “Might as well just say what you want to, Roscoe.”

He lightly shrugs one shoulder. “I did.”

I swallow hard, trying not to explode right here at this table and launch myself at him. “Well, it’s a shame you’ll have to work so much. Guess I’ll just have to catch you up on training at the end of each day. Don’t worry, I won’t let you get too far behind.”

He slams a hand down on the table. “Fuck you, Mitchell. Just because you have an easy life doesn’t mean you’re better than everyone.”

I tilt my head back on a laugh. “Not everyone. Just you.”

He pushes his chair back to get up but Max stands, placing a hand on his shoulder.

“Ribbing is fine,” Max says, looking between us sternly. “But any more than that, and we’ll have a problem.”

Ty sighs and nods, pulling his chair back into the table, shooting me another look full of hatred.

“Luca?” Max asks, as I continue to scowl at Ty.

I raise my eyes to him and nod as well. Then I smile. “It’s all fun and games. Right, Tyler?”

Ty’s head whips to me and his eyes narrow. I smile wider, just for him. And get those nice little warm fuzzies again when I see his fists tighten in anger.

“So,” Seb leans forward, placing his forearms on the table. “What’s up with this anyway? Why so much hate? Is there something more than just being in competition with each other for years?”

I scoff, but quickly cover it up with another smile. Max is carefully observing us, and I don’t want to be the one he kicks out because we can’t play nice. This is his gym, and his team. If we don’t fit with his vision, it’s game over. So, I need to play by his rules. Even though it feels like I’ll die trying…

I shrug. “Don’t know. It just is what it is.”

Ty takes a deep breath and shakes his head slightly, poking at the pizza on his plate. “Who knows.”

But I do.

I hate him because he's a smug asshole who barely appreciates his wins, as he simply nods and walks away. I hate him because he continually strips me of my number one spot in the rankings and doesn't even seem to care that he has it. Each win is like a simple box checked, like it doesn't mean anything to him. I hate that, because I want this more than anything. And I *hate* that he's good. I hate that he has a talent and skill that I need. And I've known this for a while.

And I hate him because it's fun. Warm fuzzies, remember?

But I don't say any of this. And Ty doesn't say anything either. There's a lot riding on our ability to keep ourselves in check and work together. So I have to try to put this all aside and focus on training.

With him.

How the *fuck* am I going to do this.

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SIX

I JUST WANT to get out of here. And I hate that I do. I *want* to be here, I *want* to enjoy this. But as we are all at our lockers, getting ready to leave for the day, the sound of Luca's voice as he chats with everyone is like nails on a fucking chalkboard. He's laughing and cracking jokes, reminding me of all the reasons I can't stand this fucker.

We've been in this gym for only a few hours, but he might as well have been here and known everyone for years. Everything is just easy and fun, with no care in the world as he instantly becomes good friends with every person here, commanding the entire fucking room. I've often wondered if he has ever worked hard for something, or if he was just born with a horseshoe up his ass. And seeing him here today, taking nothing seriously and making everything a huge laugh-fest, and not even having to work full time to support himself… Hard work clearly isn't that high on his priority list.

As Luca's laugh echoes around the space once again, I grit my teeth and try my best to ignore him. But I'm going to have to see him, listen to him, and train with him every day now. Fighting against him was fucking frustrating, this is going to be torture.

I see him out the corner of my eye as I pull my coat out of my locker, and even just this glimpse of him sends a jolt of anger through me. His annoying as fuck smile, his messy, floppy hair, and the random tattoos all over his body like he let someone doodle on him for fun with no thought at all… He looks and acts the way he fights.

He's unpredictable.

I fucking hate that.

I like being able to predict what my opponent is going to do next, as I am always a step ahead. But Luca Mitchell fights on feeling alone, and I swear he steps into the octagon to simply wing it. I have to be completely in the moment with him, unable to even try to anticipate what he's going to do, as he's like a loose cannon on speed. And the fucker is fast.

In and out of the cage, nothing is serious. He just does whatever the fuck he feels like, whenever he feels like it.

He cares about nothing, while I care about everything.

Yet here we are, in the same place, with the same opportunity. The one I worked so hard for, and the one he just seems to be having fun with.

"Ty, we're all going to head out for a drink, you in?" Adão asks, pulling my attention back to everyone around me.

I shake my head. "No, I work tomorrow."

"Already?" Max asks, looking surprised. "You just got here today."

"Yeah, figured I'd start right away," I say, shrugging my coat on. But really, I *need* to start right away. I need the routine, and I need to stay busy. I don't do well with downtime, and the sooner I can develop a solid routine, the better.

I feel Luca's eyes on me, and I try not to look at him. I'm not letting him goad me into losing this spot, which means I need as little interaction with him as possible.

"Ok, next time then," Adão says with a smile and a light smack to my back.

I give him a slight nod, knowing I still won't go next time. It's nothing against them, I've just never felt comfortable in social situations, so I avoid them. And eventually we're all going to be going our separate ways as we advance in our careers, so why get close now to just lose it all later?

As I pull my bag out of my locker and sling it over my shoulder, I still feel Luca's eyes on me. And I'm going to crawl out of my skin if he doesn't stop staring. He's doing this on purpose, as he wants me to get pissed off. So I turn my head to him, showing him that's not going to happen.

But he smiles that annoying smile, and I remind myself once again to stay calm.

Fuck, I want to smack that smile right off his face.

He doesn't say anything as he just keeps smiling at me.

I take a deep breath. *Don't lose it. Don't give in.*

"So, where should we go?" Rosa asks, and Luca turns towards her.

“Obviously somewhere with karaoke,” he says with a big smile.

Everyone laughs, and I immediately turn, leaving the locker room. I walk straight through the gym, out the front door, and into the parking lot before anyone can try to convince me to stay.

It’s easier this way. For them. I hate seeing the disappointment on everyone’s face when I turn them down. But it’s better than the disappointment we all feel when the attempt at friendship inevitably fails.

I get in my car and pull out of the parking lot. And again, I tell myself why I’m here, as I glance in the rear-view mirror to see everyone piling out of the gym. I’m here to train, with no distractions. My process has served me well so far, and I’m not going to change it now.

And if everyone thinks I’m an asshole… well, they’re right.

But as I think about my plan, I *am* distracted. By a different asshole. Anger bubbles to the surface, and I grip my steering wheel tight. I know I need to work on my striking, but does it have to be with him? And how are we going to train together when we can’t even be in the same room without almost blowing it up?

A sigh escapes me as I rub my forehead with my hand. It’s just more motivation to stay focused and become the fighter I need to be. We both want to be complete fighters… but I can be better.

I’ll use this *opportunity* to my advantage, and watch this fucker go down.

Again.

As the car rises on the lift, I take a moment and look around the garage. I like it here. It’s quiet, and on the smaller side. I was relieved to find something similar to the garage I worked at back home, as the bigger, busier garages literally give me a headache. They’re noisy, managers are constantly breathing down your neck and trying to get you to upsell or over diagnose problems, and there are just too many people around. In garages like this one, I have my own quiet bay where I can work as I want to, and work honestly.

Being able to start right away is a bonus, too. They recently had a mechanic leave, so it was perfect timing as they were eager to bring someone in to keep up with their long list of loyal customers.

And it helps that the owner, Bill, is a UFC fan and Max was one of his favorite fighters. Bill calls him a “hometown boy”. So, being a big fan, he understands the sport and the training required. But when he told me that he can be flexible on my work hours each week to support this, I said no. I will always work full time until it’s impossible to do so. If I have the time, I will work. It’s better than the alternative.

The car reaches the top of the lift and I move under it to begin the oil change. Today is my first day here, but I’ve quickly found my groove. Bill let me set up my bay how I wish, and as long as appointments get in and the work gets done, he doesn’t really care how I do it. The garage gets a mix of routine maintenance appointments like oil changes and tire swaps, but also has the capacity to diagnose and work on larger problems too, which is what I really enjoy. They don’t do motorcycles here, but Bill is open to it if I want to start. Maybe that’s something I can do on weekends whenever I have some spare time.

I reach up to remove the drain plug from the engine and my phone buzzes in my pocket. I ignore it, but it buzzes again and again and again. I briefly close my eyes and sigh. Another fucking group chat.

I continue to ignore it, pulling the plug and placing the oil pan underneath it to collect the oil. But as the oil drains, I pull my phone out. If Max is texting about training tonight, I don’t want to miss it.

But nope, I was right. It’s a fucking group chat for the gym. They’re all talking about last night and how much fun they had. I quickly scroll through it and watch the texts roll in. There are inside jokes and nicknames already. How? It’s been one day. I furrow my brow as I watch them all texting, not understanding this at all.

I see some texts intended for me, saying they wished I could have come, but my eyes laser in on one text in particular.

LUCA

Yeah, Ty, you’ll have to come next time. But you might need to talk. *shrugging emoji* It’s called having fun… you should try it!

I don’t even read the texts after that, as I lock my phone and toss it on the workbench. Fucking asshole. I know he’s just looking to get a reaction

out of me, but he knows *nothing* about me. And now I'm getting pissed off for reasons other than Luca poking at me.

The last of the oil drips into the pan, as my phone continues to buzz with texts on the workbench. I walk back over to it, open the group chat, and mute it without reading anymore texts.

The pep talk I gave myself last night echoes in my thoughts.

I don't need distractions. *I* will be the better fighter. I have a plan and I am sticking to it, no matter who or what tries to get in my way. Especially Luca. Let him get distracted and spend too much time making friends, jokes and mistakes.

I'll be coming out on top.

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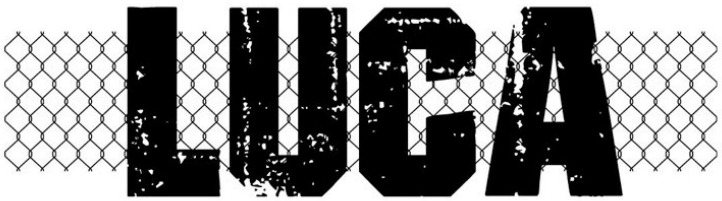
SEVEN



"NO WAY, I'll bet $50 on the Blues to take it tonight." I point a finger at Elijah as he smirks at me.

He shrugs, opening his locker. "Sure, just means I'll clean up. Habs are in it to win."

I shake my head with a chuckle and open my locker as well. Elijah is from Montreal, so he's a huge Canadiens fan, and I'm a massive St. Louis Blues fan, obviously. And I get pretty fired up when it comes to hockey. So we spent the majority of last night talking about it while we were out for a drink with everyone, and tonight, our two teams play each other. *It's on.*

Everyone is starting to trickle in to train this evening, and I am pumped. Mostly. I'm pumped to train, and get a feel for this new gym, but not about who I'll be training with. Max wants Ty and I to roll tonight. Of course, we're starting with *his* strength.

In preparation for this potentially awful experience, I spent the day rocking out to some good tunes while I unpacked my new apartment to put me in a good mood. Since I'm living alone, I was able to give it my all as I danced to Aqua while putting dishes in the cupboards. Not having roommates really has its perks.

Just as I start humming *Barbie Girl,* Ty walks in.

He silently walks over to his locker, giving a slight nod to everyone as they greet him.

I sit on the bench, kick my shoes off, and subtly observe him. *Get to know thy enemy* or something like that.

"Did you have a good first day at work, Ty?" Rosa asks from her seat beside me.

Ty glances at her, with an almost surprised expression, as his eyes quickly dart to me then back to her. “Yeah, it was good,” he mumbles as he turns back to his locker and opens it.

Rosa smiles. “Awesome.”

I furrow my brow at her. That was an acceptable answer?

I continue getting ready, watching as everyone greets Ty and he barely greets them back. He acts like such an ass, yet everyone seems to like him. I don’t get it.

So because I’m curious, I take my time getting my fight shorts on and my sweats put away, so I can keep watching him. Not only because I know he doesn’t like it when I do, but I also find myself wanting to know more about him. For someone who is so confident in the cage, he seems so uncomfortable here. Even now, as he strips his shirt off and keeps his back to everyone, I sense a general uneasiness about him. Like this is hard for him.

Speaking of hard… my eyes roam over the muscles of his back. Countless times I’ve seen him without a shirt and had my hands all over him during fights, but right now, sitting back and taking him in… I can actually admit to myself something I’ve known for a long time. Dude is hot. I quickly glance away to make sure no one is watching me check him out, but the locker room has mostly cleared out. My eyes travel back to him, taking in his tousled dark hair, and his dark brown eyes, which are now boring into me.

I adopt a smirk, hoping it wasn’t obvious I was close to eye fucking him. I stand up, whipping my shirt off as well. “What? Like what you see?” I ask, smiling sweetly at him.

He scowls, shutting his locker door and heading out into the gym.

I toss my shirt into my locker with a chuckle and follow him. Everyone is starting in on what they need to be doing, whether it’s working the bags, in the weight room, or sparring. Max is waiting for me and Ty at the mats with arms crossed, observing us as we make our way to him.

And as I try to get in the headspace to grapple with Ty, I’m still grappling with a question in my head. Why is he so withdrawn? Is this just who he is, or is it because I’m here? And why do I even care? He’s a dick.

Speaking of dick… I subtly drop my gaze to his shorts. He seems like he would have a good one… *No, fuck, stop it*. Yeah, he’s hot and is probably packing, but he’s my enemy. Good dick or not.

“Ok,” Max says as we stand before him, “you guys are working the mats today. Eventually we’ll break it down into drills but for now, just roll. Start in closed guard, so Luca can get some work in breaking it, then switch.”

I nod, knowing this is something I need to work on. But I feel those uncomfy feels, as this gives Ty a leg up on me right now. I try not to look at him, as I’m sure he’s feeling and looking smug. But I’m a glutton for punishment and subtly slide my eyes to him. And he’s blank faced, simply listening to Max. Well, *now* I’m frustrated because I can’t read him. What’s that all about? If it was me, I’d be owning this and making sure he knows I have what he needs.

“Get a feel for working *together*,” Max continues, his eyes narrowing at each of us. “And keep it to grappling only.”

We both nod, but as I quickly glance at Ty again, I see his jaw tick.

Ah. There it is.

“Got it,” I say, giving Max a salute.

He chuckles lightly and turns to Ty.

He just nods again and drops his eyes. Which is apparently enough for Max. Seriously, why can’t this guy just fucking speak like a human?

“Alright.” Max looks over his shoulder to some of the other guys working the bags. As he turns back to us, he looks uneasy. “I’ll be right back…” He starts to back away, clearly not sure if he should leave us alone. Just as I think he’s going to turn and leave, he stops. “And another thing. In this gym, we’re all about sportsmanship. We touch hands to begin a fight or match.” And with that, he turns to head off and check in on the other guys.

And I really do have to wonder why he felt like he could leave us alone. Even I think that’s a bad idea.

But then I feel a wave of guilt that I have to be watched like this. I’m a somewhat grown ass man, I shouldn’t need a babysitter. But just being around this guy, I lose my head.

I sigh, shoving that away for now, and turn to Ty with a smile.

“Sportsmanship. That means treating others with respect. Do you know how to fist bump?” I hold my fist out and gesture for him to do the same. “Here, it’s easy, I can show you.”

He practically growls as he gestures to the mat. “Get the fuck down there.”

“That’s what he said.” I nod seriously.

“What?”

“Nothing.” I put my hands on my hips and stare down at the mat. “Top or bottom?”

He looks at me for a moment, seeming to gather himself as best he can. And yeah, fair, I’m poking the bear and greatly enjoying myself.

“You’re passing a closed guard. You are on top,” he says through gritted teeth.

“Right.” I nod and wink at him, and he looks like he’s going to fucking lose it on me.

“Why can’t you take anything fucking seriously?”

I place my hand to my chest. “Oh, but Tyler, I do. Very much so. I’m here with you, aren’t I? I think that means I’m pretty fucking serious about this.” I drop to my knees and pat the mat before me.

A muscle twitches in his jaw, but he moves to lay on his back before me. He avoids my eyes, and I can feel the tension in him as he wraps his legs around my waist, putting us in closed guard position.

I try really hard not to look down at his dick as my eyes subtly take in his abs. But *no. Focus*.

The hot asshole underneath me is going to be a challenge in this little tumble we’re about to embark on, and I’m determined to kick his ass. I hate that I have to do this with him, but I need to accept that this is how it’s going to be, and… learn from him.

In Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, you need to either force your technique, or wait for your opponent to make a mistake. Which is why *he* is so fucking good at this and why I… am not as good.

Fuck, that hurt.

Because my downfall in this area of the fight is my lack of foresight. I tend to miss opportunities and then find myself in positions that I tried to avoid in the first place. What I need to do is think ahead and anticipate, to force the techniques I want to use rather than wait for an opportunity to fall into my lap. Because with Ty, that never happens. He’s always a step ahead. Unlike when we’re on our feet and I can control our little dance with the speed and agility that *I* have over *him.*

We awkwardly stare at each other for a moment, neither of us wanting to be the one to initiate *sportsmanship* with each other. But eventually, I give in. Because I can’t keep my eyes from dropping to his special area before me much longer.

His eyes laser in on my fist as I hold it out before me. He lightly taps it with his, and we begin.

Immediately, I want to stand up. It's the best way to get out of closed guard, but I know Ty isn't going to allow that to happen and will break my posture if I do. *Fucker.* So, game plan. Control the hip and opposite arm, so he's unable to break my posture when I stand. Then… well, I'll figure that out.

His legs are closed tight around my waist, and since they are high up, closer to my upper back, I can't lean back to get my elbows in and make space. And because of this, his hips are off the ground, allowing him much more movement than I would like.

He places his hand on the outside of my arm, and his legs pull me in closer to him. As he forces my arm in towards the middle line, I know exactly what he's doing. He's trying for another fucking armbar.

Oh fuck no, nope. No sir, not again.

A grunt escapes me as I try to control his opposite arm, and I think about forcing *my* technique on *him*. *Don't wait for mistakes.*

I need to sit back and get my knee down the middle line. He's eventually going to move his leg over my shoulder to complete the armbar, and when he does, I can push myself up to my feet, and take control of this conversation.

But he's too fucking calculated. He knows I'm thinking of something, and he's not yet making his move. He's gaining more control of my arm, and using pressure to slow me down. And well, fuck. It's working. But that speed and agility he's trying so hard to suppress? It's coming, baby. Oh, just you wait.

And *fuck yes,* the second he starts to move his leg up to my shoulder, I'm faster than him. He still has control of my arm, but I move my knee into mid-line and push up into standing.

But then he sweeps me, and before I know it, I'm on my back.

The fuck?

I hear cheering, and I'm vaguely aware that everyone is standing around us. But my focus remains on this fucker on top of me. We're rolling hard now, and I let the cheers urge me on. Until Ty successfully moves into back control.

I'm losing my ability to control this as Ty is consistently anticipating my every move and positioning himself in the perfect angles for him to

dictate how this goes.

And I'm getting fucking angry.

He gets me into rear mount with his arm over my chest and I curse to myself. Because the next second, I'm in a tight as fuck rear naked choke. With no way out of it.

As he pulls tighter, I tap.

The cheers for Ty piss me off even more than my loss to him. I immediately stand up, refusing to look at Ty or anyone else.

"So," I hear Max's voice as he approaches me. "What did we learn?"

I take a deep breath and turn around, my eyes immediately finding Ty over Max's shoulder. He is simply standing there, looking at me with that blank expression while everyone congratulates him. And my anger grows. I don't *want* him to celebrate his win over me, but also why *isn't* he? Seriously… this fucking asshole. Does this really mean nothing to him? Why is he even here if he doesn't care?

"Luca?" Max asks and I bring my gaze back to him.

I sigh. "I needed to continue controlling his arm and hip until I got a foot back to prevent a sweep."

Max nods with a smirk. "Yeah. So, why didn't you?"

I narrow my eyes at him, and he chuckles. He turns to Ty and gestures for me to come back to the mat.

"Again. And Luca, commit to your game." Max steps back, and I'm left staring at Ty.

As we move back into closed guard position, I take a deep breath. As much as I hate this… I *am* getting to work on the skills I've been wanting to tighten up.

I just hate that I need to learn it from Ty.

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EIGHT

IT'S minute four of a five-minute round, and everyone is standing around us cheering.

Luca manages to pass my guard and maintain side control for three seconds, meaning he's up three points on me. And that pisses me the *fuck* off. Just an hour ago, he wasn't even able to break my closed guard.

But as I control his back by getting my feet between his thighs, I know I can manipulate his movement with my hooks in. And I do. And I add my four points to the tally in my head.

Everyone is calling out their encouragements, but I block it out. No distractions. I need to win this.

Max calls out, "Thirty seconds!" and before I can make a plan to keep my lead, Luca is shuffling to spin out of my control. My attempts to maintain back control fail as the fucker is too fast, and he manages to move into top position, right as Max calls time.

Luca is straddling me as the round ends, and we both whip our heads to Max.

Max smiles down at us. "Luca wins by one point with an advantage."

"Yeah!" Luca smacks two hands on my chest and jumps up with a huge smile.

I blow out a breath and push to my feet, squeezing my fists at my side. *For fuck's sake.* He wins by a fucking *advantage* point. Yeah, sure he managed to get into a point scoring position, but he didn't maintain the control. And guaranteed if time wasn't up, I would have swept him.

But I let myself get distracted. By *him*. I'm so pissed at him being here that I'm letting it get to me, and I wasn't as focused as I should have been.

“That’s it for today,” Max calls out and I grab my towel from the bench to wipe my face.

Luca celebrates his win behind me, with happy chatter from his new best friends.

Thank fuck we’re done.

I head into the locker room, grabbing a new towel and making my way to the showers. As I step under the warm spray, I lower my head and let the water run over me. Letting it wash away my failures and help me reset, ready to start again tomorrow.

But Luca keeps pushing his way back into my thoughts.

It’s so fucking easy for him. As much as it pains me to say, he’s a natural fighter. He *feels* everything and moves so quickly and effortlessly… even in his areas of weakness, like grappling.

While I approach the fight with thought and planning, he appears to go into it with minimal effort and fights off instinct alone. And I’m beyond fucking pissed off that today, working in *my* area of expertise, this worked for him. In all of our fights, over the past several years, I’ve always had the leg up on him on the ground. But now, if he actually starts to use his head and focus on his techniques…

I rub my hands over my face, and grab my shampoo. I’m here to improve *myself* in *my* fighting. I need to stop worrying about him. My fucking *teammate.*

Stay focused.

As I finish my shower and shut off the water, I expect everyone to have left. I stayed in here long enough, hoping that would be the case. But I hear some laughter in the locker room, and I sigh.

I don’t move, as I simply stand here in the shower stall, the cool air nipping at my wet skin while I listen to the happy voices.

I remember when I used to feel like that. I’d laugh, and joke around with my brother and his friends, when I barely had a care in the world. Life was great, and having fun was all that mattered.

I certainly learned my lesson.

But I can’t help the feeling that creeps in. The one I haven’t felt in a long time. A pressure in my heart and stomach, followed by the knocking of some locked away thoughts begging to come out.

But they’re going to stay there.

I've made my choice, and I have a plan. Being a part of whatever it is out there, isn't it. I wouldn't be here in this gym if I gave into every whim, and strayed from my path.

Maybe once I reach my goal I can give in a little bit…

After I pull on some sweatpants, I tentatively make my way into the locker room. Luca, Sebastian and Rosa are still here. I keep my eyes down and go straight for my locker.

But as I open my locker door, a towel hits the back of my head.

I whip around to see Luca's smiling face.

"Whoa," he holds up his hands with a smirk, "easy there, Tiger."

I turn back to my locker and clench my jaw to keep from saying or doing something that could get me kicked out of here.

He leans against the locker beside me, arms crossed. "What, no comeback? Oh," he widens his eyes excitedly, "you like being called *Tiger? Ty-ger*?"

I'm going to crack a fucking tooth if I try to hold this in any longer. "What the fuck do you want, Mitchell?" I ask, turning to face him so he doesn't think he's winning whatever game he's playing.

He smiles again and I tighten my grasp on my locker door.

His head tips towards the exit, where Seb and Rosa are making their way out of the locker room. "We're going to grab something to eat."

"Good for you." I reach into my locker to grab my bag, digging around in it for my t-shirt.

I see his annoying smile out of the corner of my eye. "Come with us."

"No." I find my shirt and pull it out of my bag. Why is he even asking me this? I hate him and he hates me, and neither one of us wants to spend time together.

"Aw, come on Ty," Luca pouts, arms still crossed. "Is it because I beat you? It's ok, you might get another chance to be on top." He chuckles, like he just made a hilarious joke.

I turn on him quickly, stepping closer. "Why is this so fucking easy for you?"

His eyebrows lift, as his eyes flick between mine. "What?"

I gesture around the now empty locker room. "You just fucking waltz in here like you don't care about anything, everyone immediately loves you, you barely even try out there-" I point towards the gym, but quickly shut up.

Shit. Why the fuck did I just say that…

He smirks, and my blood fucking boils.

“And?” he asks, simply.

I stare back at him, squeezing my t-shirt in my hand so I don’t wring his neck. “Fuck you.”

He shrugs one shoulder. “Ok.”

My eyes narrow, my chest rising and falling with a deep breath as I once again try to keep myself from doing something I’ll regret. Not that I would ever regret kicking his ass. But I would regret it if I lost my spot here because of this asshole.

He laughs and I’m practically shaking from holding back. His eyes then move down my bare chest, and when they meet mine again, they’re full of something that almost seems like intrigue.

“Whatever, man.” He sighs and pushes off the locker. “Come or don’t, I don’t fucking care. We’re going to the burger place down the street. But, seeing as you’re dead set on being an asshole, see you tomorrow night.” He picks up his bag from the bench, slings it over his shoulder and leaves the locker room.

The door closes behind him, and I’m left here alone, listening to the sounds of happy voices retreating as he, Seb and Rosa make their way out of the gym.

Fucking asshole.

I drop onto the bench and rub a hand over my forehead. *Fuck.* Why did I have to say any of that. I *gave* him something to use against me. I am always in control. But around him, something in me just snaps and I lose it.

I hear the locker room door open and close my eyes, preparing for Luca to come back in with more quips.

“Ty?”

I turn around to see Max, who looks surprised to see me here.

“Hey.” I stand up and put my shirt on. “Sorry, I’m just leaving.”

“No, no.” He shakes his head, putting his hands in his sweatpants pockets. “This is your home, you can be here whenever you want. I just thought everyone was gone.”

I nod, shoving my shorts into my bag and closing my locker. “They are.”

“You joining them for dinner? Rosa was practically drooling over some kind of gourmet burger as they were leaving,” he chuckles.

“No,” I mumble, putting my jacket on. “Heading home.”

Max nods, pressing his lips together and observing me for a moment.

I sigh, knowing where this is going. “Look,” I sling my backpack over my shoulder, “I don’t need to be buddies with anyone. I’m good. I can show sportsmanship in the gym and do what I need to do here to be a part of the team, but I have my personal life all figured out. I’m not in the market for friends.”

He holds a hand up, nodding again. “Alright, that’s fine.”

Fuck. I’m a dick.

“Sorry,” I mutter. I put my hands in my jacket pockets and sigh again. “I’m just... I’m good.”

“Ok,” he says with a slight shrug. “So, I just want to check in with you about how everything is going here and how you’re feeling about training, after the first day.” He then quickly adds, “Which I’ll be doing with everyone.”

“It’s good. The gym is amazing.” I nod as I look around the fancy locker room, still not quite able to believe that this is really my home gym now.

Max smiles. “Glad you like it.” He pauses for a moment. “And training with Luca?”

Tension enters my body again at just the sound of his name, and Max sees it.

“Listen,” Max takes a step closer to me, “I understand rivalry. I’ve had my fair share of it. But like I said before, you two can learn a lot from each other. I’m not asking you to be friends, or to even like each other. Just be open to learning together. There’s a reason you were both constantly riding number one and two in the rankings. You’re the missing pieces to each other’s puzzle.”

I exhale forcefully. I know what he’s saying… and I know he’s right. I’m mad at myself for letting him win against me today, but… as much as this fucking pains me to say… I do think I could learn from training with him. I let him get to me tonight, when I needed to focus. But I can also recognize that training with him can help me be more in the moment when fighting, so I can let go and feel the fight for what it is, and not get stuck in what I want it to be.

“I’ll let you go,” Max says, taking another step closer to pat my shoulder as he walks by me. “Have a good night and see you tomorrow.”

“Yeah, thanks, you too.” I offer him a small smile which he returns, and heads towards his locker.

As I head out of the gym and towards my car, I take a moment to think on all of this. I need to learn how to work with Luca, and not let my hatred for him take over. I have a job to do, and I can’t let anything get in the way of that.

I don’t need to like him.

I just need to tolerate him.

But even that sounds impossible.

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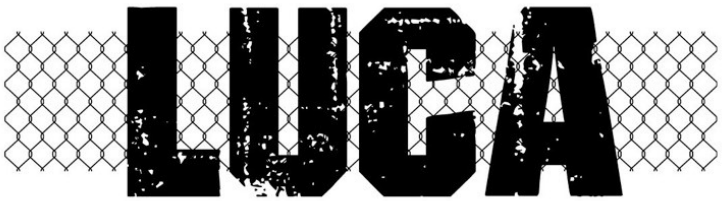
NINE



"THIS IS PROBABLY the best burger I have ever had," Rosa mumbles around a bite of food, eyes closed.

I chuckle, popping a fry into my mouth. "Perhaps a weekly tradition?"

"Oh god." Rosa rolls her eyes. "I'll need to double my training if so."

Seb laughs. "Doubtful, love," he says in his hot as fuck Irish accent. "If you keep going as hard as you did tonight, I think you'll actually have to decrease the amount of training to make it fair for the rest of us."

"Yeah, girl, you're a fucking menace on those bags." I smirk at her. "I'll go a round with you in the ring."

Rosa cocks an eyebrow at me. "Think you'll have enough energy after facing Ty? Talk about being a menace. You guys went *hard*."

My eye fucking *twitches*. "Yeah, well. What can I say, he brings out the *best* in me." I pick up my burger and take an aggressive bite.

Seb and Rosa share a glance.

"What?" I say, mouth full.

"I just don't understand the hate." Rosa shrugs. "You're both nice guys and-"

"You think he's *nice*?" I almost spit my food across the table.

They both nod.

I swallow and stare back at them. "The fuck?"

"I mean, he's quiet, but he seems like he has a… gentle soul," Rosa says thoughtfully.

"*Gentle soul*?" I say with a scoff.

She nods with a light chuckle. "Yeah, he's quite withdrawn, but the broody ones are always nice underneath it all. I don't know, I just sense it."

She picks up her drink and eyes me over the top of it. “And I’m never wrong about these things.”

“I’d say you’re wrong on this one.” I nod seriously. “Trust me, I’ve seen his true colors.”

Seb leans back in his chair. “Have you?”

“Yeah,” I shoot him a look, “I’ve fought him for years. He hates me, and he’s shown it.” I move to pick up a fry but quickly raise my hand to point a finger at both of them. “And you’ll see it too. I mean, fuck, you saw tonight how he doesn’t even care about any of this. I tap and he just stands there like it means nothing. He doesn’t speak to anyone, he’s just always angry and, like seriously… who doesn’t celebrate a win? That’s just fucked.”

Seb nods slowly with a small smile tugging at his lips.

“What.” My eyes narrow in his direction.

He shrugs one shoulder and picks up his burger. “You invited him out tonight.”

I scoff again and wave him off. “I knew he’d say no, I just like fucking with him.”

Rosa shakes her head at me. “I really do think there’s more to him. I hope he opens up soon.”

The waitress comes to refill our drinks, and I hold back on any more snarky remarks about Ty. But even as Seb and Rosa start talking about some movie they want to see, I’m still seething.

Honestly, I have no idea why I invited him out tonight. But regardless of why, I’m especially glad he didn’t come after telling me I had it *so easy.* The fucker doesn’t know the first thing about me. I’ve worked my ass off to get here, and he’s going to diminish my hard work by saying it just comes easily? Like he’s one to fucking talk. He barely acknowledges anyone in the gym, and apparently they all think he’s *nice.* So, seems like some things come pretty fucking easy to *him.*

I sigh and take a bite of my burger, trying to listen to Rosa and Seb as they discuss this movie and some actor I’ve never heard of. But my mind keeps wandering, thinking about what Rosa said.

Maybe there is more to Ty.

And why do I want to know what that is?

“Alright, line up!” I blow my whistle, and the kids run to the gym door to line up for lunch.

“Bye, Mr. Mitchell!” One of the kids waves to me as they head out and I smile, waving back. This has been a fun morning, and I really like this school. I didn’t plan on taking any jobs during my first week in St. Louis, but since it’s Friday and no one will be in the gym until later, I figured why not. And I’m glad I did, because we played floor hockey, and it’s been a blast. Who says teachers can’t join in?

As the kids head off, I tidy up the gym so it’s ready for the next class after lunch, then head towards the staff room. But as I reach the staff room door, I hear someone calling my name from down the hall. I turn around in confusion, as I don’t know anyone here, and see a guy about my age running up the hall with a big smile.

“Hey,” he says, stopping before me, still smiling and out of breath. He taps his chest. “Dan Fletcher. I teach grade two.”

“Hey.” I smile and hold out my hand, which he shakes. “Luca Mitchell… which apparently you already know.”

He nods with a laugh. “Yeah, sorry. I’m the only male teacher in this school, believe it or not. I got a little too excited when I saw we had another guy subbing Phys. Ed. today who isn’t sixty years old.”

I laugh as well. “Are they often sixty years old?”

Dan winces with a nod. “Most of our subs are retired teachers just picking up some hours here and there.”

“Makes sense,” I say, as we make our way into the staff room. “Same back in Warsaw, actually.”

We take a seat at the long table where several other teachers are sitting, along with the principal, Mrs. Weatherbee.

“Hey, everyone,” Dan calls down the table, “this is Luca Mitchell. Subbing for Diane in Phys. Ed. today.”

“Hi Luca,” the woman sitting next to me smiles and holds out her hand, “nice to meet you.”

I return her smile, shaking her hand. “You too.”

Everyone greets me and introduces themselves, and I tell them all I won't remember their names until I've met them at least five more times, earning myself some laughs. *Score.* These people are fun.

"So, you said you're from Warsaw?" Dan asks as he takes his lunch out of his bag.

I nod, taking a bite of my salad. "Yeah, just moved here a few days ago."

"What brought you here?" one of the other teachers asks. A woman who I think is named… Beverly? Betty? Belinda? I can't remember.

"I'm an MMA fighter and moved to train with a retired professional fighter at his gym. Max Fairburn. He's from St. Louis, so he started a new elite training gym here."

A shocked silence takes over the space and I try not to laugh. This ain't my first rodeo.

"Sick." Dan holds out a fist for me to bump, breaking the silence, and I can finally let out my laugh.

Everyone else chuckles as well, and relief rushes through me. There are always some people who don't get it, and don't like it. Hell, there were several teachers at my last school who hated it - and me, I'm sure - so I'm always prepared for some backlash. But it's a welcome relief when I don't have to defend my choices and what makes me happy.

"Wow." One of the other teachers sitting next to Dan places her elbow on the table and cradles her face in her hand. Mary. No… Megan. Maybe. "That's amazing, Luca. UFC fighting is my favorite sport."

I give her a tight smile as she bats her lashes. First of all, I know it isn't. Because if it was her favorite sport, she would know it's MMA, not UFC fighting. UFC is a championship and not a style of fighting, and this error lets me weed out those people trying to look cool just to get some. And yeah, I've given in to some girls making this error before. And some guys, too. But, and this brings me to my second of all… I'm not interested. She's super attractive, and I'd usually entertain the idea, but I find myself kind of repulsed by her not-so-subtle attempts at flirting. I'm not really sure why, but seeing as I just made this huge move to focus on my fighting, I guess I'm not letting my dick get any attention for a while. That kind of sucks, but… I get it. *Sorry dude.*

I try to ignore Mary-Megan's attempts at flirting as Dan and I settle in to talk sports. He watches and plays a variety of sports, but I'm excited to

hear that he's a hockey player and plays in a rec league.

"You should join," he says with a smile. "We're always looking for new teammates. It's pretty laid back, so you don't have to attend all games."

"Really?" I ask, letting my excitement show. "Oh man, that would be awesome. I can never commit to the schedules, so I haven't been able to join a league in years."

"Yeah, for sure. We have quite a few guys who pop in whenever they can. It really is just for fun, so don't expect high level hockey," Dan says with a laugh.

"I'm so in." I can barely contain my giddiness as I take out my phone, and Dan and I exchange numbers so he can send me the information.

Mary-Megan slides closer to Dan, peering at his phone. "Is this a co-ed team?"

Dan gives her the side-eye. "You play?"

She nods with a smile. "I've been wanting to."

Good Lord.

"Oh, well," Dan shoves his phone in his pocket and dramatically checks the clock on the wall, as lunch is over, "nope, men only league. Sorry. There's a women's league on Tuesday nights." He stands up and gives me a look to do the same.

I chuckle as I follow him out of the room, and Mary-Megan shoots daggers at Dan.

"I'll text you, away from prying eyes," he says, patting me on the back.

"Appreciate that, thanks." I smile as he takes off down the hall. Man, so far everyone in St. Louis is just so lovely.

Mrs. Weatherbee appears before me just as I'm about to head towards the gym. "Luca, I just wanted to ask you something."

Well, shit. Here we go. The *"do you think your hobbies have the best influence on our children"* talk.

"Sadly, Diane has been struggling with her health this year," she says in a soft and sympathetic tone, "and she will frequently be taking time off for the remainder of the year. So, there will be a fair bit of availability to sub here for Phys. Ed. Would you be interested in going on the priority list for subs for us?"

My face breaks out in a huge smile and relief washes over me. "That would be amazing. Yes, please."

She smiles warmly at me. “Of course. You fit right in here. It’s almost like you’ve been here for years.” She laughs lightly. “I’ll put you on the list, and we look forward to having you here again.”

“Thank you,” I say, feeling fan-fucking-tastic right now. A new friend *and* a potentially steady subbing job? Fuck yeah.

But on my walk back to the gym, I have a nagging feeling that I can’t quite place. Until it hits me. It’s guilt.

“Why is this so fucking easy for you?”

Ty’s words rattle around in my brain as I make my way to the office in the gym. He thinks I *waltz* without caring, that everyone immediately loves me, and I barely even try. But he’s wrong. Sure, I just made a new awesome friend and snagged a sweet gig, but I *tried.* I didn’t just sit there and let it come to me. I put myself out there, I made an effort and I *spoke* to people. And it paid off.

And, again, things seem pretty fucking easy for him too. He has a full-time job to start with right away, everyone in the gym likes him, and he’s a good fighter. So, what’s the fucking problem?

And why do I even care about this?

I throw my phone on the desk and stare down at it for a moment. An idea comes to me, and before I can talk myself out of it, my phone is in my hands again. I find Ty’s name and tap on it, opening a private message to him.

> Hey. So, we don’t like each other. And that’s fine. But we both want to be here, so we need to figure out a way to make this work.

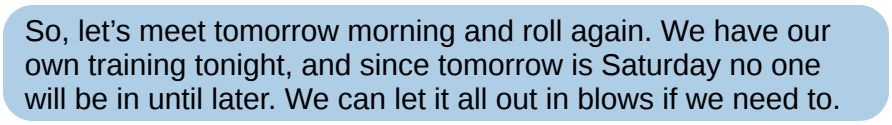
And because I can’t help it, I send another.

> Admit it. I have something you need. *winky face emoji*

Ok, no. Reel it in.

I sigh, tapping out another text. I don’t know why I’m doing this, but this nagging guilt is driving me to prove something to him. He thinks it’s easy for me? Well, I’ll show him just how much I actually work at this, and earn everything that comes my way.

> And you have something I need too.


So, let's meet tomorrow morning and roll again. We have our own training tonight, and since tomorrow is Saturday no one will be in until later. We can let it all out in blows if we need to.

There. I'm being the bigger person. Even though it's a bit selfish on my part, so I can show him how hard I can work. *What am I, five?*

Anyway, whatever. I toss my phone back onto the desk as I hear the excited chatter from the kids entering the gym for my next class.

But my eyes stay glued to my phone screen.

Am I feeling… nervous?

No. Nope. That's not it.

But why isn't he texting back?

Ok, what the fuck? Apparently now I'm a fourteen-year-old girl.

I sigh and head into the gym to greet the kids and get floor hockey started. He's probably ignoring me, which is fair. If he sent me that I would ignore him too.

So, I lose myself in floor hockey with the fourth graders for the next forty minutes, and purple team wins. Which is my favorite color. So, win-win.

But as soon as the period ends, I find myself in the office again, immediately reaching for my phone. And as I unlock it, I smile. Win-win-win.

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TEN

THE DOOR to the gym is locked, which I expected. It's 7:45 in the morning, and I'm not meeting Luca here until 8:00. And obviously he wouldn't be here early. As I take my key out and let myself into the gym, an uncomfortable feeling takes root as a thought takes over. What if he doesn't even show? What if this is some kind of a game to mess with me, and I fell for it?

As I enter the gym, I glance at the large clock on the wall, even though literally one minute has passed. I blow out a breath and make my way into the locker room, pushing those thoughts aside. I would be here anyway, so it doesn't even matter. It's not like I'm going out of my way for him.

But even as I change and turn the lights on, the dread in the pit of my stomach remains. I tried my hardest to ignore Luca last night as I was working the bags, but he has this annoying as fuck ability to completely take over every room he's in, no matter how big it is. So I had the pleasure of hearing all about his plans last night. And since I know he went out with a new friend from work, I'm again questioning if he's even going to show up this morning. My eyes reluctantly find their way to the clock again. 8:01 am.

"It doesn't fucking matter," I mutter to myself. *He* is the one who wanted to roll today. Which means he wants to work on something that he needs *me* for. So, fuck him and whatever he ends up doing with his day.

I start jogging the track around the perimeter of the gym to warmup, thinking I'll probably spend time on the bags again this morning. Last night I focused on punch combos with the heavy bag, but today I want to work on some low kicks with the MMA bag.

Just as I finish running through the plan for my workout in my head, and my tenth lap around the track, I hear the gym door open.

Luca strolls in wearing sunglasses, a pink hoodie, and gray sweatpants, with a coffee in hand.

I stop running and look at the clock. 8:22.

“You’re late,” I say as he walks towards me.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out his phone, checking the time. “Ah, yeah. But looks like you got a good warmup in.” He lets out a light laugh. “And don’t tell me you wouldn’t have been here doing exactly this anyway.” He takes a sip of his coffee with a smirk.

“You’re the one that said 8:00.” I take a deep breath, trying so fucking hard not to smack that coffee out of his hand. If he didn’t stop for a fucking coffee, he could have been here on time.

He chuckles and walks towards the bench behind me. “Fuck, you’re wound tight.”

I press my lips together and tighten my hands in fists at my sides, doing everything I can to contain my anger.

“See?” Luca drops his bag on the bench and gestures to my hands. “You need to learn to let go a bit, Ty. I think you’d like it.”

“Fuck off,” I grit out, turning around to continue running the track. Fuck him, he can train on his own.

“I like your last offer better.”

I turn to face him again. “What?”

He laughs and subtly shakes his head.

That’s it.

“What’s your fucking problem, Mitchell? Why is this so hilarious and just one big fucking joke to you?” I step closer to him, and he furrows his brow. “This isn’t some free ride you can fuck around with.”

Luca’s eyes flick between mine and he tenses. “Obviously it’s not,” he says, his voice low and dark. “I’m not joking with any of this. But you know what I am doing, Ty?” He steps closer, bringing himself less than an arm’s length away from me. He looks down my body, then back up to my eyes. “Enjoying myself. You can do both, you know.”

A restless energy builds within me under his intense gaze, as his hazel eyes continue to stare into mine. I break our eye contact, shaking my head. “Whatever. If you want to actually roll, get ready.”

“Oh,” he smiles, immediately shifting from dark and intense to light and unbothered, “no need. I came prepared. Since I was *so late.*” He pulls off his hoodie and sweatpants so he’s in just his fight shorts. Which are also pink.

He gives me a smug, satisfied look, and I roll my eyes. As he turns to place his clothes on the bench, my eyes roam over the random assortment of tattoos all over his body. He has one leg that’s almost covered, as well as entire torso and arms. Every time I fought him, I swore he showed up with more. And now that I’m actually seeing them, I’m surprised by how many he has.

And they seem just as random as he is.

They’re a mix of color and black and white, with no real theme to any of it. It’s like he covered his eyes and pointed to a picture when picking each one out. On his back are some flowers, a fucking *unicorn*, a tree, some kind of Celtic design… none of it makes any fucking sense. And I guess that suits him.

“Like what you see?”

I raise my eyes to meet his as he looks over his shoulder with a smirk.

I shake my head. “Your tattoos are ridiculous. They make no fucking sense.”

He bites his lip and looks down at his chest as he turns to face me. He almost seems to get lost to his thoughts as he simply stands there for a moment, chewing his lip. Then he shrugs. “Why does it have to make sense?”

Of course. Everything is just fun and careless.

I turn away from him to make my way to the mats. But I stop when he continues.

“Not everything has to have a meaning and purpose, does it?”

I pause, taking in the pleading undertone of his question. And as I turn to face him again, I see it in his eyes too. Like he really does want to know.

“I don’t know,” I say, my voice quieter than I intended.

He nods slightly, as we stand there silently for a beat too long.

“Well, let’s get this show on the road then, shall we?” Luca suddenly claps his hands together and smiles widely. “Come on, Ty. We’re late.”

He practically bounces over to the mats and I close my eyes, taking in a deep breath. *Give me the fucking strength…*

“What do you want to work on?” I ask as I reluctantly join him on the mats.

“Hip control in guard passing,” he says. “I’ve been thinking about it since we rolled the other day, and when I do lose it in the last moment, I know it’s because I’m not controlling the hip to create enough space to either explode into attack or make adjustments.”

I cock an eyebrow at him, and he furrows his at me.

“What?” he asks.

“Nothing.” I gesture to the mat for him to get down in position. But really, I’m surprised. It’s actually a thoughtful conclusion he’s come to about his grappling, and one I’ve thought of about him as well. *And* one I’ve used to my advantage, many times.

The reluctant feeling to support him with this starts to settle in, but I push it away. As much as I hate it, he’s my teammate now. And Max’s words rattle around in my brain. *The missing pieces to our puzzles…*

“What guard?” I ask.

“Let’s start with closed again.” He drops to his knees, and I’m intrigued by the serious look on his face. It’s almost like he cares.

I lay on my back, and wrap my legs around his waist, crossing my lower legs high up on his back. Luca takes a deep breath, looking down at my hips.

He then raises his eyes to mine. “Ready?”

I nod, and we begin.

Luca puts up a good attempt, but as anticipated, he fails to effectively control my hips and ends up chasing me instead. I manage to keep him under my control and put him in a position to continually defend against my attacks.

“Fuck!” Luca forcefully pushes me back and flops to his ass on the mat.

I huff out a breath. “Not even going to let me get you into a submission?”

He forcefully rubs a hand over his face, then moves back onto his knees, motioning for me to return to closed guard position. “Again.”

I shoot him a look. “So you just want to keep drilling this instead of seeing it through?”

He glares back at me. “Isn’t that the point of *drilling*?”

I roll my eyes and move into position in front of him. “You said roll, not drill.”

“Whatever,” he mutters with a look of determination as he watches me once again wrap my legs around his waist.

I observe him as he takes another deep breath and seems to think for a moment. I’ve never seen this side of him. When we’re fighting, he’s all feeling, moving quick, dancing on his feet and seemingly having fun with it. When we’re not fighting, he’s an annoying asshole who can’t take anything seriously. But right now, he’s determined, focused, and all business.

“Ok, ready?” he asks, once again raising his eyes to mine.

I nod, taking a moment to see the intensity in his gaze. “Yeah.”

But as soon as he moves to place his hands on me, I stop him. “Wait.”

He looks up and I sigh. “You need to lock your elbows, and push here.” I grab his hands and place them on the front of my hips. “By pushing down with locked elbows, you’ll uncross my legs.”

He looks down at his hands on my hips and does exactly what I said. As he pushes down, my legs uncross, and my hips fall to his bent knees below me, and under his control.

The space around us is silent, as Luca keeps his hands on me. Neither one of us moves.

And as I watch him, looking down at his hands on my hips, I almost feel like… I don’t want to move.

His fingers move lightly over my shorts and his eyes slowly move up to meet mine.

“Now you could bring your posture up and one knee in, one knee out to pass the guard,” I say, keeping eye contact with him.

He nods slowly but doesn’t do anything.

Suddenly, I feel an overwhelming urge to move out of this. My mind is screaming at me to get up and leave, but my body remains still. We’re looking into each other’s eyes, and his hands remain on my hips as a feeling settles deep in my stomach. One that is both uncomfortable, yet oddly comfortable at the same time. My eyes drop to his hands as I briefly acknowledge this feeling, and Luca’s grip tightens.

He takes a breath in as he passes my guard. And I don’t fight back.

“Why?” Luca asks.

I sit up and try to avoid eye contact with him, but I fail. He's looking at me with his brows drawn together in confusion.

"Why what?" I ask with a bite to my tone that I didn't intend on.

"Why do that? Why help me?"

"Isn't that what you wanted? Isn't that what we need to do?" I shoot back at him.

He cocks an eyebrow at me and then shrugs one shoulder. "Yeah, I guess so…"

"By locking your elbows, you gain greater control of my hips to keep me in defense, so you can pass and give yourself more opportunities to attack," I say, looking away from him again, and getting back on track. "And if you can keep that control, you'll add more mobility to your hips for easier adjustments, and to defend against submission attempts."

Luca is silent for a moment, so I reluctantly look at him again.

The way he is observing me once again brings on that unsettled feeling. The uncomfortable comfort… Which makes no sense.

Why does it have to make sense?

He looks like he's waiting for me to say more, but I don't know what he wants. I just told him what he needs to do.

He drops his eyes and nods his head slowly, running a hand through his messy, dirty blonde curls. When he raises his head again, his face breaks out in a huge smile. "I have great hip mobility," he says in a light tone while moving his hips side to side.

Of course.

I sigh and push to my feet. "If you can't take this seriously, Mitchell, I'm out."

He laughs and is on his feet and standing in front of me before I can leave. "Nah, man, come on." He laughs again, but it seems a bit forced. "Really, I promise." He places a hand over his heart and schools his expression. "Serious."

I roll my eyes and turn away from him, back to the mats. "Butterfly guard."

"Oh, fun," he says. "Or, no, I mean, serious business." He nods as he moves into position.

We work on passing various guards, and I continue to support Luca in maintaining hip control. I keep my focus on the drills, and Luca manages to put me on my defense more than I'd like to admit. But I also keep

reminding myself that I’m not fighting *against* him. Instead, I’m fighting a feeling I don’t understand, and one I don’t want to admit.

The one that flows through me when we slow down enough to work together and make progress. The one I feel when he takes my advice, and I learn something from him. And when we make eye contact, and I successfully refrain from wiping his smile straight off his face.

And when the gym door opens and Max walks in, I’m shocked to see that almost three hours have gone by.

Not everything has to have a meaning and purpose… does it?

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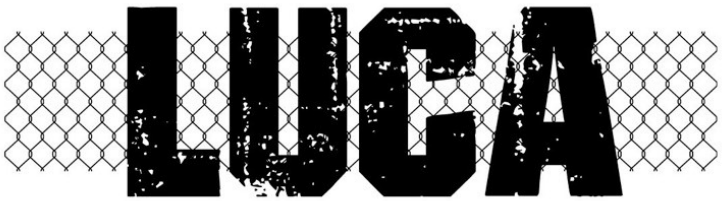
ELEVEN



"DAMN, YOU ARE QUICK," Del, our boxing coach, chuckles as I lower my gloves.

I wipe my forehead with my forearm and smile. "My specialty."

He laughs and points with his chin for me to exit the ring. "You're all done, good job."

"Thanks." I hold out my glove for him to tap and count my lucky stars for the hundredth time this afternoon. I still can't believe I'm training with Del Stanton. I watched him fight professionally out of St. Louis when I was a kid, and wanted to be just like him. Before my mom turned it off because it wasn't *appropriate*. Well, Mom… joke's on you. Even though she was the one who put me in kickboxing in the first place… Anyway, I'm here now so it all worked out.

I hop out of the ring, joining Rosa and Noah at the bench.

"He's right," Rosa nods, "you are fucking fast. And you have a mean uppercut."

I huff out a laugh as I pull off a glove. "Nothing compared to this guy here." I elbow Noah and he blushes. Such a shy little dude.

Noah starts to protest but I hold a hand up. "Take the compliment."

Rosa nods seriously at him. "And not only the uppercut, you have a sick left hook too."

I smile as Noah mumbles his thanks, and he and Rosa start in on a discussion about weight shifting when throwing a left hook. I try my hardest to listen and participate, but the *thumps* from the MMA bag in the corner of the gym competes for my attention. And I let my eyes slide towards the sound.

Ty is training alone, unsurprisingly, as he works on some drills and low kicks.

I slowly take off my other glove as my eyes roam over his legs, abs, the muscles in his shoulders, his pecs…

“What do you think, Luca?”

“Hm?” I turn to Rosa who is looking at me expectantly.

She gives me a quizzical look. “We were talking about training this week, and maybe Monday we’ll get back in the ring.” She gestures with her head to the boxing ring.

“Oh,” I nod, smiling, “yeah, totally.”

She gives me a half smile. “You must be tired from being here so early this morning.” She chuckles and quickly glances at Ty, then back to me. “Glad to see you both survived.”

I take the opportunity to bring my gaze back to him as well for a moment. “Yeah, barely,” I mutter.

“Well, it’s a step in the right direction.” Rosa pats my back as she takes off towards the locker room.

I blow out a breath and head to the shelves on the wall to grab a towel. And the thumps once again beg for my attention. As I lower the towel from my face, I watch as Ty stops his drills and backs up a step, keeping his eyes on the bag.

He’s laser focused, even at rest. He taps his gloves together in a rhythm, and I realize he’s tapping to the timing of his drill for his punch combos and kicks. Damn… he never lets go. He is *always* on.

He lifts a glove to push his dark hair off his forehead, and goes back to work.

“Any plans tonight?”

“Jesus.” I jump and look to my left where Noah is standing. I blow out a breath and stare back at him. “Where did you come from?”

He furrows his brow. “I was here the whole time.”

“Oh.” I quickly glance towards Ty again, then back to Noah. Well, I hope he didn’t realize I was watching Ty and... doing whatever I was doing. “Well, you certainly are light on your feet.”

He chuckles and blushes again which makes me laugh. He’s a fucking demon in the cage, but outside of it he’s like a little mouse. A demon mouse.

“And, no,” I say, tossing the towel onto the bench, “no plans tonight. I’m going to finally finish getting my apartment all sorted out and probably just have an early night for once. You?”

He shakes his head. “Same. I start work this week, so I'm hoping to have a quiet night.”

“Oh, you found a job?” I ask with a smile, hoping he got on with the company he’s been eyeing here. From the sounds of it, he’s a pretty experienced electrician and could likely have his pick of jobs.

He smiles widely. “I did. Got the job I wanted.”

“That’s awesome!” I hold up a hand for a high five, which he does with another laugh and another adorable blush.

“Thanks,” he mumbles with a smile.

The sounds of Ty’s workout once again fill my ears, and I can’t help it when my eyes dart over Noah’s shoulder to him.

Noah follows my gaze, and then turns back to me. He leans into me slightly. “So, I have to ask…” he says in a low voice.

My heart picks up its pace, and I don’t know why. I mean, I think I know why, but I also think I don’t *want* to know why.

“How did it go this morning?”

I run a hand through my hair and shrug. “It was ok,” I say, trying to sound nonchalant and not let on that I actually… enjoyed it. “Kicked his ass a few times, it was great.”

Noah raises his eyebrows with a slight smile but doesn’t say anything.

“Ok, fine.” I lower my hand with a dramatic sigh that is totally deserving. “I *learned* something. A few things, actually. I tend to get stuck in guard passing as I move through it too quickly, and he helped me slow down to think it through. I never had anyone strong enough in grappling to really train those missing pieces, so… I guess…” I sigh again, “this will be helpful.”

Noah smiles. “That’s great. So… maybe the rivalry is almost over?”

“No,” I snap, but quickly hold out a hand to grasp Noah’s shoulder. “Oh my god, I’m sorry, that was so rude.”

He laughs. “It’s ok. Clearly this runs deep. Maybe with some time…” he trails off with a small shrug.

I shrug too with a sigh. “Yeah, who knows,” I murmur.

“Well, at least you’re working together.” Noah turns towards the locker room. “You coming?”

I nod. “In a minute. Just need to put my gloves away.”

Noah leaves… but I stay right where I am for a moment longer.

Ty lands a low kick that is all kinds of deadly, and his expression barely changes. He just continues his drill, working to perfect what’s already great. As I take in his muscles and gaze at his ass, I finally admit it to myself.

He’s not just hot, I’m attracted to him. Like, I’d fuck him. And let him fuck me. Hard.

Fuck.

I rub a hand aggressively over my face and turn around to put my gloves in the locker.

Seriously, what the fuck? I hate him, why am I thinking about him fucking me? And why does it feel like there is something else lurking under the surface of this deep hatred?

This morning, it all felt different. For the first time ever, we were on the same page, and I think I saw the real him… for a brief moment. The hard exterior cracked, ever so slightly, and it wasn’t the Ty I typically see in the cage. Or even outside of it.

I can still feel his eyes on my skin, as he attempted to make sense of what I show the world. And that vulnerable feeling is lingering from when I told him it doesn’t have to make sense. Because I don’t want it to.

And as I stand here in the gym, watching him at the bag, his eyes are on me again.

Nothing about this morning, or in this moment as we look at each other across the gym, makes sense.

So, I want more of it.

The last box is finally put away, and as I flop onto my bed, I let out a big sigh. Moving sucks.

I roll over, taking the blankets with me so I curl into a burrito and snuggle into my comfy bed. It’s movie time. And not just any movie. My favorite comfort movie.

The Last Unicorn. An epic fantasy movie of a unicorn embarking on a legendary adventure to defeat the evil King and save the unicorns from extinction.

I flip on the TV in my bedroom and lay back on the pillows to lose myself to the magical world.

But even when our hero unicorn is captured by the witch, my mind is traveling somewhere else.

To the gym.

To this morning.

I forcefully blow out a breath and roll over to grab my phone, pulling up Ty's name. If I get this over with, then I can go back to my magical escapism, and hopefully get this asshole out of my head.

Hey. No one is going to be in the gym again tomorrow morning. Want to train?

I drop my phone to my chest and wait. Tomorrow is Sunday, so the gym will be busy, but not until the afternoon. And even though we could train with everyone else there… selfishly, I don't want to.

I groan and tilt my head back on my pillows. *What am I doing?* He is a fucking asshole, and I've spent years hating him. One little moment after a few days of being around him and suddenly I think… what? That he'll just pull his pants down and we'll fuck? Or, even worse… that he's a good guy?

No. *Hell* no.

I toss my phone on the bed beside me and roll over to face the TV again. Fuck him, he's probably not even going to respond anyway. I'll just sleep in tomorrow, and head to the gym when-

My phone buzzes and I grab it.

Too quickly.

TY

Fine, I'll be there anyway.

Dick.

Of course you will be. You know, normal people sometimes take at least one morning off a week

I stare back at my phone screen, but he doesn't respond. I huff out a breath of amusement.

Normal people also know how to have a conversation

I smirk at my phone screen as the three little bubbles start dancing.

Why are you even texting me? Shouldn't you be out somewhere?

Why, want to join? I can send you my location. It's a cozy little spot.

I take a photo of my view from bed and send it to him. And I get a little rush of anticipation. I just sent *Ty Roscoe* a photo of my bed. *Oh, the scandal*.

There's nothing for a while, so I set my phone down on my chest and return to my movie. And try to ignore the pounding of my heart. Which only intensifies when my phone buzzes again.

Are you watching cartoon unicorns?

Oh, now this is good. A smile spreads across my face as I get ready to take this in whatever direction it's going to go.

You a fan too?

Of children's movies? No.

shocked face emoji Tyler. This is not a children's movie. This is some dark shit. Which actually very much suits you.

Nothing.

For fuck's sake, this is like pulling teeth, or herding cats, or whatever one finds difficult when putting in far too much effort. I try to ignore that little voice in my head, asking me why I'm even putting in this effort.

Oh, you prefer romcoms. Knew it.

I don't watch movies.

Figures.

Should have guessed. Do you do ANYTHING for fun?

(Fun: amusement, enjoyment, pleasure, excitement. Can also be a mood for finding or making amusement)

And once again, nothing.

I take my lower lip between my teeth as I watch the phone screen, feeling a sense of disappointment that he isn't writing back. But maybe it's not necessarily disappointment. Maybe I... feel bad? There's obviously something more to Ty. Something deep. He's still a dick, but maybe there's a reason he's a dick.

Not that that changes anything…

I bet you're doing something fun right now

Let me guess

Reading a book

Doing a crossword

Watercolor

Stargazing

I'm going to block you.

But you haven't. So…

You must be stargazing then

What?

That's the last one you responded to.

It's a nice night, why wouldn't you?

What the fuck are you talking about.

Well, who knows Ty. It's not like you're talking to me. This could be going a lot smoother if you just participated

Don't you have a kid's movie to watch?

My eyes dart to the TV as I realize I haven't been paying attention to it at all. I've seen it a thousand times, but still… It's my favorite movie. But something about this conversation is totally filling my bucket.

But this is so much fun

For you.

Exactly

I'm going now.

Be on time tomorrow.

I huff an amused laugh. Such a drill sergeant.

Bye Ty. Have fun with the stars.

I know he won’t respond to that, so I lock my phone and set it on the bed beside me. But I don’t bring my attention back to the TV, and instead stare at the ceiling.

Fuck.

I think I have a crush on my enemy.

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TWELVE

I GRIP my steering wheel tighter as I get closer to the gym. It's 7:40 am, and I'm already pissed because I know Luca won't be there on time. He was smug enough yesterday when he rolled in twenty minutes late, what's another thirty today?

But who cares. Like I told him, I would be here anyway.

I don't care if he even shows.

But the tightness in my chest at that thought tells me I'm a liar.

The gym appears before me as I turn onto the street, and I'm surprised to see a red Jeep in the parking lot. I didn't think anyone else was going to be here this morning. But I'm even more surprised by the slight feeling of annoyance that we won't have the gym to ourselves. But I quickly shake that feeling off. I can still kick Luca's ass regardless of who's around.

As I walk past the Jeep after parking my car, I take in the purple flower hanging from the rear-view mirror and the random stickers all over the rear door. I slow my pace as my eyes land on a unicorn sticker, then slide to the door of the gym.

No way.

The door is unlocked, and as I push it open, I'm met with a view of Luca standing in the middle of the gym with his arms crossed and a huge, smug smile.

"You're late," he says.

All I can do is glare at him.

"What?" he asks, far too innocently.

"You're early."

He glances at the clock on the wall, like he doesn't fucking know, and shrugs. "You told me to be on time. You know Ty, if you're not early, you're late. I feel like that's a rule you would live by."

I sigh, adjust my bag on my shoulder and walk past him towards the locker room.

Don't kill him, don't kill him…

"But also…" Luca says, and I stop.

Reluctantly, I turn to face him. He is standing in the same spot, but has dropped his arms and his smile.

He sighs and steps towards me. "I was late yesterday because I thought you wouldn't show. If I was late… I saved face." He shrugs with a sheepish expression.

We're both silent for a moment, as I take this in. And his vulnerability urges me to be honest too. "I thought you wouldn't show either."

His eyebrows raise slightly and a small smile tugs at the corner of his lips.

"But I was still on time," I say. "So, you're still an asshole."

A smile spreads across his face with a light laugh and another shrug. "Well, yeah."

I roll my eyes and turn around, continuing my trek to the locker room.

And Luca follows.

"How was stargazing?"

I set my bag on the bench and turn to face him again. "What the fuck are you talking about, I was not stargazing."

Luca nods seriously and leans against the lockers across from me. "So, what were you doing?"

"Nothing," I mutter as I pull my locker door open and take off my hoodie.

"Sounds fun."

A breath of frustration automatically escapes me, and I look back at him. And I feel a small flutter deep within me as I catch his eyes trailing down my back.

As he brings them back up to meet mine, I quickly look away from him.

I wait, expecting some snarky comment, but he doesn't say anything. As I continue to get ready, he does the same at his locker behind me.

We’re silent as we strip off our sweats and I fight every urge I have to turn around and face him again. And why? I have no fucking idea. It’s Luca fucking Mitchell, I want nothing to do with him. And yet, there’s something within me telling me that’s not true.

I hear his locker door close, just as I do the same and finally turn around. He’s running a hand through his hair, and my eyes immediately drop to the skin showing over his ribs, where the cut-out sleeves of his tank top drops low. I can’t quite make out what the tattoos are there, but one that I can see looks like a moon.

But I quickly look away and grab my hand wraps. “Let’s go.”

“Yup,” Luca nods, doing the same, “let’s.”

As we enter the training space, Luca hops in front of me with a huge smile. He looks down at the wraps in my hands. “So, since we have wraps… does that mean we’re kickboxing today?”

I bite the inside of my cheek. I didn’t want to say this before now, because I didn’t want this going to his head. But… he *is* a highly skilled kickboxer, and I do want to work on a few things with him that the bag can’t help with. “Yes.”

His smile somehow gets even bigger. “And what are we working on?”

My jaw tightens. “Kicking speed.”

Luca nods thoughtfully. “Alright.”

I let out a breath and shake my head. “That’s it?”

“What?” he asks.

“No snarky comeback?” I tilt my head slightly, staring back at him and waiting for it.

He furrows his brow and presses his lips together, shaking his head. “No. You helped me, and I can help you.” He then cocks an eyebrow. “If you’ll let me.”

“I’m here aren’t I,” I say, surprisingly without the bite I had intended.

Luca smirks slightly. “I thought you’d be here anyway?”

I exhale to prevent the anger from taking over and push past him towards the boxing ring.

“I know what you were working on yesterday,” Luca’s voice echoes in the empty gym as he follows me. “Low kicks are one of my specialities, which I’m sure you know.”

Another ripple of anger makes its way through me. *Yeah, my legs remember.*

“But you want heavier kicks, don’t you?”

I stop and turn to glare at him.

He stops as well, a few feet from me. “Which is why you want to work on speed. So you can land better, and increase overall power.”

I don’t say anything, even though he’s right. Speed will help me in many areas of my fight, such as keeping up with fast fuckers like him, and so I can deliver more effectively.

“Your technique is perfect.” He crosses his arms and assesses me. “You can drill, alone, with timed, high-volume kicks on a heavy bag and they’re deadly.” He takes a step towards me. “But add another variable, like a moving target, and you think too much. This slows you down, so you lose your power when you do get a kick in. When on your feet, you can’t control what your opponent does as easily as you can when grappling. You need to learn to let go and… trust yourself.”

I swallow hard and feel tension enter my body. A different sort of tension than I’m used to, because I hate that he can see through me so easily.

“I’ve fought against you many times, Ty,” he says, like he’s reading my mind. “I know how you fight and think.”

I want to tell him he knows nothing about me and has no idea how I *think*. But for some reason, I stay quiet.

“So, let’s spar today.” Luca unrolls one of his wraps to start wrapping his hands. “Maybe you can actually loosen up for a minute.”

The tension in my body eases slightly, but its claws are still in me, refusing to let go completely. And because of that, it pains me to realize he has a point.

“Fine.” I start wrapping my hands as well, finally able to drop my eyes from his.

Luca chuckles. “*Fine*,” he says in a mocking tone. “Always *fine*, never *Yeah! Alright! Aye!*” he snorts out another laugh. “Show some enthusiasm sometimes, would you?”

I raise my eyes to him as I continue wrapping my hands, and he just stares back at me.

He shrugs. “Alright, we’ll work up to it.”

I turn away from him, but feel a small tug at the corner of my lips. Which quickly falls away when I remember who I’m with.

What the fuck was that…

Luca tosses a pair of shin guards at me. “Normally I would say let’s spar without these, but since you *want* to go full blast I guess we need these. So, don’t hold back. Since it’s not like you need to work on *control…*”

“I won’t,” I growl as I grab them, and put them on.

Once our gloves and guards are on and we’re in the ring, it’s completely apparent to me that I’m going to hate this.

Luca is hopping on his toes with a big smile, tapping his gloves together. “Ready, Tiger?”

My stomach flips, and I swallow. I’m not sure why I seem to have an almost nervous feeling about this. I’ve trained every day for years, and I’ve fought this fucker countless times. But training with him… my heart pounds and I feel that same weird feeling I had yesterday. Comfortably uncomfortable…

I hold out my glove and Luca stops bouncing, looking down at it. But he reaches out to tap it so we can start.

And right away, he’s controlling me. He’s lightning fast, and gets a punch combo in before I can even figure out where he is.

I grunt and push him back, which pulls a laugh from him. He’s in the perfect position for me to land a low kick to his right leg. But the second I take my step to do so, he quickly darts in and lands a hit on my ribs, making me drop my glove slightly, allowing him to place both hands behind my neck and land a knee strike to my midsection.

“Fuck,” I grunt, taking a step back to compose myself.

Luca hops on his toes and slightly shakes his head. “Stop *thinking* so much. I could see the wheels turning and knew you were going for a low kick. Don’t let me know what you’re thinking.”

I exhale forcefully and lift my gloves.

Fine, fucker.

I take a step towards him, and see him shift his weight. But I don’t know where he’s going. I curse to myself, as I’m already on defense and I haven’t even done anything yet.

I step in again and immediately go for a push kick so I can set up an attack and keep him at a distance.

But the second I make contact with his stomach he drops his hands and grasps my foot, pulling me back with him. I lose my balance, and he quickly lands a left hook after dropping my foot.

Fuck!

I shake my head, trying not to show him how much that punch rattled me.

How is he so fucking fast?

"Stop. Thinking. So. Much," Luca says as he hops around. "You *know* all of this, why are you planning it all out? Just do it."

"You can't fight without a fucking *plan*, Mitchell," I grit out.

He rolls his eyes. "You can't have a *plan* for everything, *Roscoe*. Just let yourself do whatever feels right. Stop trying to make this fight something it's not."

Those words hit me harder than any punch ever has.

I'm nothing without control. I need it. And the thought of not being a step ahead, and not knowing what's coming, gives me an intense, uneasy feeling.

"Maybe I need to get you all fired up," Luca says in a low voice as he stops hopping around. "Get you out of your head and into your feels." He smirks darkly at me and tilts his head. "What do you say, Ty? You want to pound on me?"

I lower my gloves slightly as I see a light dancing in his eyes, despite the dark expression on his face.

"You want to see me go down…" his eyes drop down my body, then back up, "but you're too slow. You're more than capable… but you get in your own way. Why can't you let yourself have fun?"

He's silent for a moment as he waits for an answer. But I don't give him one.

He nods. "Well. Fun or not…" he smirks again, "you can't beat me unless you learn to actually *feel* something for once, and realize that not everything is yours to control."

Suddenly, I step forward and throw a jab at him, followed by a straight punch which sends him backwards a few steps as he loses his balance. I follow him, laying a punch combo and getting a satisfying left hook to his ribs. The rush of air that leaves him spurs me on even more.

I barely even register what I'm doing, as I let all my frustration out on this asshole. Knees, kicks, punches, they are all flying in a blur. I'm vaguely aware that he is getting some in on me too, but I don't care. I let the feeling of my punches landing and the sounds of my kicks on his flesh fuel me, and his words drive me to inflict as much damage as I possibly can.

Until he manages to back up from me, and his hazel eyes bore into mine. Those eyes that are usually filled with amusement and mischief are now unreadable, as he adopts an expression that I can only describe as empathetic.

Which pisses me off even more.

I step towards him again, but instead of punching him, I push him against the ropes of the boxing ring. With his back pressed up against the ropes, my gloved hands rest over his chest as it rises and falls with heavy breaths.

“Easy there, Tiger,” he says in a low, dangerous voice.

My heart is rioting in my chest as my frustration and anger morphs into something else. The unease I feel around him is rushing in, and an odd feeling is taking over. The one I can’t make sense of. And as Luca’s eyes drop to my lips, that feeling grows. If I didn’t know any better, I would think it was something like… anticipation.

Luca swallows, and my eyes slowly move down to his throat. But when I bring them back up, I meet his gaze.

Why am I not moving? Why are my hands still on his chest? Why does he piss me off so much, yet I seem to want more?

He gently pushes himself off the ropes and closes the very small gap between us. My hands start to fall from his chest, but he raises his to my elbows to keep them there.

“What are you doing?” I ask, in almost a whisper.

He is so close, I swear I can feel his breath on my lips. There’s a war deep inside me, the urge to push him back losing to the curious need to know what this is.

Luca shakes his head slightly. “You know I hate you, right?”

The war starts back up, and the need to fight rises. I start to push his chest, but he holds my hands in place with his gloves, not letting me.

“But maybe hate is the wrong word.” He lets out a breath and holds my gaze, seeming to ask me a question that I definitely don’t have the answer to.

I shake my head slowly, and he smirks.

“It should be obvious by now, Tyler, that I think you’re hot.” His eyes drop again to my lips. “And I think there’s a reason why I get under your skin.”

“I’m not into guys,” I say, but I hear the weakness in my voice. And my hands still haven’t moved.

“Shame.” Luca looks back into my eyes and I’m suddenly aware of how quick my breath is. “You’re missing out.”

What the fuck? I saw him with a girl at a fight just last year, who he was practically making out with every ten minutes. And is he really coming on to me right now? And I am *letting* him?

“But you know,” he says, his voice still low, “the more you check me out, you might change your mind.”

My walls immediately slam up again and I press my hands hard against his chest. “Fuck you.”

He smiles with a chuckle. “Again, with that offer. Be my guest.”

I finally push him back, creating distance again between us. I look at him as he stands there, that smirk still on his face… but he’s hiding something underneath it.

Disappointment.

And I think I feel it too.

The door to the gym opens, and both of our heads whip towards it. Seb and Adão come in, laughing and joking around with each other. They wave, and Seb eyes us warily.

I just stare back at them, not waving back, and I know that’s a dick move. I’m both relieved and annoyed that they are here, and with the amount of confusing thoughts in my head right now I can’t be bothered with a greeting.

Luca turns back to face me, and his smirk is gone. We look into each other’s eyes in silence for a moment, before the corner of his mouth tilts up again, and he winks at me. He then turns around and hops out of the ring, heading over to Adão and Seb.

I watch him, while my heart continues to thump in my chest. And I know it’s not from the fight.

What the *fuck* was all of that.

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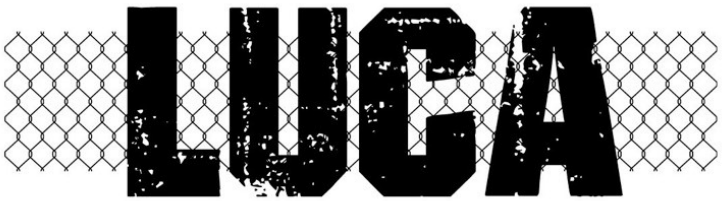
THIRTEEN



WELL, I thought I had a crush.

Now I know I do.

And I am losing my fucking mind over it.

Of *all* people I could be interested in, why does it have to be *Ty*? He's the complete opposite of every person I have ever gone after or been involved with. And I have spent years building up this juicy disdain and rivalry, only to now throw it all away for… well, I don't even know what. I don't think I've ever seen him smile, he barely speaks, he's rude as fuck… but something about him continues to pull me in. And I can't figure it out.

Ever since that moment in the boxing ring with him a few days ago, I keep thinking about him standing before me, his hands on my chest and both of us breathing heavily while we just stared at each other. It feels like I finally peeled away another layer. A thin one, but a layer nonetheless. He let me see just a little bit more of him. But I want even more.

Instead, we've spent the last few days ignoring each other in the gym and going about our training without so much as a glance in each other's direction. Which is normal for him as he doesn't really speak to anyone, but something tells me there's more to it. He felt something too. I know he did.

I hope he did.

An announcement over the PA system in the school brings me back to reality, and I push myself up from my desk. School is done for the day, and as a sub, I don't have to stick around for anything. So luckily, I can get out of here early.

As I make my way down the hall, dodging kids and handing out the most epic high fives, I see Dan standing outside his classroom while his

kids get ready for home.

“Hey, man.” I stop next to him and chuckle as he wearily watches over the kids.

“Is this week over yet?” he asks, as we watch a kid put on his open backpack upside down and everything falls out of it.

I suppress a laugh. “Sadly, it’s only Wednesday. But,” I turn to face him with a smile, “we have hockey tomorrow night.”

He tilts his head back with a sigh, while another kid yells, “Mr. Fletcher, I can’t find my sock!”

“It can’t come soon enough,” Dan mutters, picking up a sock from the ground and holding it up for the kid, who bounds over to take it. He then smirks at me. “You’ve been here every day this week, you permanent staff now or what?”

I snort a laugh and shake my head. “Still a sub, so, sorry but I’ve gotta go.” I make a show of slowly backing away from the children.

He huffs out a laugh and rolls his eyes. “Fine, but you’re buying the first be- …round tomorrow night.” He eyes the kids, but they’re all focused on getting their jackets on.

“You got it.” I give him a salute and turn to leave, feeling a bit bad that I get to escape the chaos and he doesn’t. But I have places to be.

Specifically, the gym. And since I’m heading right there, it should be quiet since everyone will still be at work.

And at that thought, as I pull out of the school parking lot, an image of Ty pops into my head. One of him bent over, working on a car…

Oh. No. Stop that right now.

Damn… I have it bad. I hate this. So much.

“Fuck,” I mutter to myself as I reach down to crank the volume on my music. I’ll blast these thoughts from my head if I have to with an epic sing along. And as I belt out the lyrics to *Everybody* by the Backstreet Boys, my mind is clear of all images that could get me in some serious trouble. *Thank you, boys.*

I enter the empty gym, humming *I Want It That Way*, and head straight to the kitchen to make a pre-workout shake. I’ve been putting off strength and conditioning training for the past couple days, but today is the day… *ugh.*

“Just the man I was hoping to see.”

I look up to see Max enter the kitchen with a big smile.

“Hey.” I smile back at him. “What’s up?”

He pulls out his phone and taps away at something. “I just heard of a grappling tournament in a few weeks that is being organized by a BJJ gym in town. So far it looks like there will be some good competition, and I think you should go.” He flips his phone around, showing me the details. “Isolate some of these skills in competition with other opponents and see where you stand.”

I nod vigorously. “Oh, hell yeah.” I smile widely at him. “I’m in, absolutely.”

He chuckles. “Awesome, I’ll forward this to you. I think Noah and Seb are interested too.” He taps at his phone to send it to me. “When was your last grappling tournament?”

“Ugh.” I sigh. “Too long ago. But I feel like I’m in a good place for another one.”

Max nods and leans against the counter, crossing his arms. “Getting some good training in?”

I shake my drink and stare back at him, and he just chuckles.

“Well,” he says with a smile, “based on what I saw when you were rolling with Seb yesterday, I like the changes you’ve been making. So… as long as you and Ty don’t kill each other, keep it up.”

I just nod and take a drink.

“I know it’s hard,” he says, eyeing me. “But after training with him just a few times, you’ve made some great progress. So, get back to it. You have a competition to win.”

“Yeah, ok.” I sigh. “Will do.”

He pushes himself off the counter and knocks a fist to my shoulder as he walks by me, heading out of the kitchen.

While I down the rest of my pre-workout, I get a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. One of both excitement and dread at the thought of getting back to training with Ty. How can you like and hate someone at the same time? Is there a word for that? I’ll find out.

But right now, I need to shake it off like Taylor Swift. Because it’s strength and conditioning time, and kettlebells and lunges are unfortunately calling my name.

And annoyingly, as I work through my circuits, I can’t help but eye the gym door every time it opens with a hopeful feeling. Which is fucked. He

doesn’t want to see me, and I don’t want to see him. *I. Don’t. Want. To. See. Him.*

Except when he does enter the gym, my stomach flutters and I stare at him for a beat too long.

I set down my kettlebell and grab my water bottle, taking a drink as I observe him walk across the gym floor to the locker room. He keeps his head down and doesn’t initiate a greeting with anyone. And when they greet him, all he does is nod his head towards them.

Again… why am I lusting after this asshole?

When he gets close to me, I step towards him. “Hey.”

He looks up and stutters in his step with a confused expression. Like he’s surprised I’m talking to him.

I guess I am too, because I hesitate as I try figure out why I even stopped him. “Uh, Max has me entering a grappling tournament in a few weeks. Which means I need to get back into training…”

He just looks back at me, not saying anything. Wow, ok, the prick is going to make me say it.

Anger rises as I stare right back at him. “So,” I say tightly, “I have a few things I want to keep working on… with you. Since… you’re the best one to do that with.”

He nods slightly, not breaking eye contact with me.

Oh, fuck him.

“You’re that much of a smug asshole you’re going to make me say it?”

“Say what?” he asks simply.

I tighten my fists at my sides and take a deep breath. “Will you roll with me tonight?”

Something flashes through his eyes that I can’t quite get a read on, and he nods. He drops his eyes and opens his mouth to say something, but I hold a hand up to stop him.

He brings his eyes back to mine with a question, waiting.

I give him my best *annoy Ty Roscoe* smile, and get those warm fuzzies when his jaw ticks. “Don’t say *fine*.”

His chest rises and falls with a deep breath, and he grips the strap of his bag tight. “Ok,” he grits out.

I place a hand over my chest. “Wow, I can practically feel the excitement from here.”

He shakes his head and turns to leave. “We’ll roll after I finish my workout.”

I try not to roll my eyes. *Control freak.*

“Fine,” I say to his back.

He stops and glances over his shoulder at me, and I swear I almost see a hint of a smile.

As he continues into the locker room, I reluctantly look away and return to my workout. But as I move about my circuits and chat with everyone in the gym, my eyes continue to find him. And when I notice he is wrapping up his workout, my stomach does that annoying flutter thing. Even though just a couple hours ago I was trying to hold back my anger towards him.

Elijah approaches me with a towel around his shoulders, out of breath from running the track. “What are you up to now?”

I gesture with my chin towards Ty as he starts in on some stretches. “Rolling with him.”

Elijah’s head whips towards me. “Really? Tonight?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

He eyes me. “Don’t you think it would be better to do this in daylight when there are witnesses?”

I huff out a laugh. “We’ve trained alone a couple times now, it’s fine.”

“Ok…” Elijah says, unconvincingly. “I can stay. I don’t mind. Max already left, so I kind of feel responsible for keeping you both alive.”

I glance around the gym, realizing it’s just the three of us left here. Rosa and Noah weren’t here tonight, and Seb and Adão left a little while ago.

“Oh, damn, I didn’t even realize he left.” I rub the back of my neck. “Uh, no, really, it’s fine. We’ll live. I promise.” I give him a reassuring smile.

It takes him a moment to return my smile, clearly worried about leaving us alone. “Alright. Well… I’ll send the ambulance if needed.”

“Deal,” I laugh and offer him a fist bump, which he returns.

Elijah heads off to the locker room, and Ty continues to stretch while I wipe down the kettlebells and weights I was using.

And as Elijah leaves the gym, the door closing quietly behind him, Ty and I are left standing on opposite sides of the gym. Alone, for the first time since we stood before each other in the boxing ring. When I told him he was hot, and he could fuck me.

We stare at each other across the gym, neither one of us saying anything or making a move to get this roll party started.

And the flutters just keep coming.

Well, fuck me.

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FOURTEEN

THIS IS EXACTLY what I was trying to avoid. I don't want to be alone with him. I just want to continue training separately and pretend like he doesn't exist.

But when he asked me to roll tonight, I couldn't ignore the little voice in my head yelling at me to say yes. Because he was right about one thing. He does get under my skin, more than anyone else ever has. And why that is, I don't know. Or maybe I do, and I'm just not ready to admit it yet.

I don't ever feel like this around anyone. Especially a guy. And especially *him.*

I keep his gaze as we stand on opposite sides of the quiet, empty gym, just looking at each other. Waiting for one of us to make the first move.

And what move is that?

I blow out a forceful breath, dropping my eyes from his and running a hand through my hair. "Let's get this over with."

"Again, with the excitement," he says. "Reel it in already, would you?"

I meet him on the mats and feel that anxious energy take over me again. The anticipation, the unease, the wonder… and I hate that. This is my area of expertise over him. *I* dominate him in grappling, and now I'm on edge facing him. Even though we're probably just drilling again.

He strips off his shirt and turns to toss it on the bench behind him. My eyes immediately land on the fucking unicorn tattoo.

"What's with the unicorn?" I ask, as I take my shirt off as well and toss it on another bench.

When I turn back to him, he quickly raises his eyes from my abs and clears his throat. "What do you mean?"

“I mean,” I say pointedly, as if he doesn’t fucking know, “why do you have a unicorn tattoo on your back?”

Luca just shrugs. “Why not?”

“Seriously? Just, why not?”

He sighs as he shrugs one shoulder again. “My little sister really liked unicorns when she was younger, so I got a unicorn. I wanted to get something for her, it *made sense*.” He rolls his eyes and shakes his head.

My eyes fall to his ribs, landing on the moon tattoo. “And the moon?” I ask, before I can stop myself. *Why do I care?*

He glances down at the tattoo. “Just for fun.”

He smiles and I sigh. Right, nothing has a meaning or purpose for him.

I don’t even know why I asked.

There’s an awkward beat of silence while we stand before each other on the mats, and I try not to let my eyes roam over more of his weird tattoos.

“Ok, so… what do you want to work-” I start, but he steps forward.

“Let’s just go.”

“What?”

“Let’s roll.” He gestures to the mat. “Let’s not go all Ty and break this down, just do it.”

The tension settles in my muscles as, once again, he has no plan. He’s just winging it and wasting my fucking time.

“*You* asked *me* to train with you tonight.” I stare back at him, seething. “And you don’t even have anything you want to work on?”

“No.” He shrugs and shakes his head. “Come on, Ty. We don’t have to plan. I just want to roll, that’s it.” He tilts his head with a playful smirk. “Can you do that?”

“What is your fucking problem?” I narrow my eyes at him. “You asked me to help you and now all you want to do is play around? You could have asked anyone to do that, you said there were things you wanted to work-”

“Can you just not think for one fucking second?” Luca holds up a hand to stop me.

I swear to God if he tells me that one more time…

He watches me expectantly, and when I don’t say anything, he sighs. “Guess not.” He turns back to the bench, and I feel a jolt of disappointment.

I stretch out my fingers, not realising I was squeezing my fists so tight. “Ok.”

Luca stops and turns around, eyeing me. “Ok what?”

Jesus fucking Christ.

“You’re going to make me say it?”

He slaps a confused look on his face. “Say what?”

I bite the inside of my cheek so hard I taste blood.

“Ok, ok, don’t give yourself a stroke,” he laughs. But then he schools his expression and steps towards me.

My heart starts thumping as he gets closer, memories of him standing close to me in the boxing ring flooding my mind. Remembering the feeling of his breath on my lips and his gloves holding mine in place over his chest. His eyes peering into mine, and his voice low, and dangerous.

He stops a couple feet before me, waiting for me to make the first move.

I give myself another moment to settle, before I hold out my fist, and he reaches out to gently tap it.

But the second his hands are on me, my heart is thrashing.

Focus. Forget it’s him… just fight.

I release a breath and go for it. As I suspected, he makes his first mistake early on and attempts a grip at my shoulder. I duck, getting his other arm over my opposite shoulder, my foot between his, and I take him straight down to the mat on his back.

Except I falter and stay too high on my knees. He continues to roll, moving on top of me. I just straight up fucking *gave* him side control.

I grunt and manage to get my hands clasped at his shoulder, straightening my arms to create distance and push him back. But as I do, my eyes meet his, and I hesitate.

He moves in close to me again, keeping me in side control. And the motherfucker gets his knee into the side of my hip. As much as I hate that I’m in defense right now, I fucking loathe him for getting in my head. I have no plan and I don’t know what my next step is. Because his hands are on me, his hips are against mine, his breath is on my neck… it’s distracting, and I can’t fucking focus.

I can’t do this.

“Stop,” I push him back. “Stop!”

“What?” He sits back on his knees and looks at me with concern.

“Just…” I rub a hand over my face and sit up. “One second.”

I have no fucking idea what any of this means. I don't know why I am reacting this way to him, and why I can't even form a fucking thought to do what I am *made* to do.

"Do you need-"

"I said fucking stop!" I yell as I drop my hand and glare at him.

He stays quiet, sitting on his knees with his brow creased as he watches me.

It's his fault.

He got in my head.

All that bullshit about me checking him out, and that I'll change my mind. His lips close to mine, my hands on his chest…

The disappointment I felt when I pushed him away.

The way he made me feel like he actually wants something from me. Like he wants to be close to me, to touch me…

My eyes fall to his chest as he breathes deeply, and I take a deep breath as well.

"Do you want to work through that again?"

I snap my gaze back up to meet his. "What?"

"The takedown," he says, his eyes flicking back and forth between mine.

I swallow, and nod, trying to gain some fucking composure again. "Yeah."

As we stand up, I give my head a shake.

Get back in it. Focus. Pay attention. Forget him.

Luca holds his fist out and I tap it, going over the steps in my head for the takedown and preparing to get it right this time. I can't fuck this up again.

I stay in front of him, placing my foot before his and dropping him before me. This time, I stay low so when he tries to roll me through, I don't move.

I pause as he stops fighting, and is looking up at me with a smile.

"Feel better from a good drill?"

I just stare back at him, not willing to give in to his games.

"One of these days, Ty…" he says softly, "you're going to have to just let go. Feel something, and realize you don't always need to be in complete control."

A mix of anger, nerves and curiosity rolls through me, and I press my hands down on him harder. “Feel what?”

Luca quickly reaches up to grab my arm and rolls me, swinging his leg over my hips to straddle me. He places his hand over my throat, gently wrapping his fingers around it. And for some reason, I let him.

“Feel the fight,” he says, his eyes on his hand as he tightens his grip. “Why does that make you so angry? To be told you don’t have control?”

I raise my hands to push him off me as the anger continues to rise, but he presses down on me harder, gripping my throat tighter.

“Maybe you need to feel something that actually brings you… pleasure,” he says in a low voice, leaning closer to me. “When was the last time you really lost yourself to pleasure, Tiger?”

My heart is pounding and my breathing is heavy as I look up into his eyes.

He leans in even closer, his nose brushing against mine. “Let go, Ty,” he whispers. “Try it.”

The next thing I know, his lips are on mine, and he’s tilting my chin up with his hand still wrapped around my throat. His tongue pushes past my lips, and I can barely keep up with my own actions as my hands grip his elbows, my lips part, and my tongue slides against his. It’s like I lost all control of my body as it moves on its own, taking from him and giving a piece of myself. I’m vaguely aware of the thoughts that are dancing along the periphery of my mind, telling me this is a bad idea. Reminding me that I’m with the *guy* I *hate*. But I can’t seem to listen to them, and they slowly fade away.

And as Luca rocks his hips against mine, I let go.

My muscles seem to unlock, allowing me to move with him, to feel the pleasure he is giving me. And my guard drops. An unfamiliar ease washes over me as I lose that need to protect myself, and I allow this to just happen.

Luca reaches a hand between us and shoves it down my shorts, grasping my hardening cock. A thrill rushes through me, and rather than pushing him away, I pull him into me tighter and kiss him deeper. Warmth radiates throughout my body as his hand strokes my cock and a groan escapes me.

As Luca pulls his lips from mine, I drop my head back on the mat. The feeling of his hand on my dick, and his lips traveling down my neck and chest, is pulling the tension from me, filling me with a sense of contentment

instead. He moves quickly as he travels down my body, his hands roaming until he gets to my shorts. He pulls them open, and immediately wraps his lips around my cock.

“Fuck,” I grunt as he sucks me, and my hand grips his hair tight.

I squeeze my eyes shut tight, the war within me rising again to potentially stop this. But I don’t. The overwhelming pleasure from his hot mouth on my cock and his hands trailing up my legs and stomach feel oddly right, and his words continue to echo in my mind. “*Let go. Try it.*”

My eyes finally open, and as I look down at him, I groan as I take in his lips wrapped around my dick and his hazel eyes peering up at me. The pressure is building, and I’m riding closer to the edge as he takes me deep into his throat.

“Fuck,” I pant again, gripping his hair even tighter as I watch him bob on my cock, and he takes a hand up to wrap around the base. “Fuck, I’m going to come.”

He moans, and a euphoric rush flows through every single one of my muscles. My entire body tingles, releasing everything I’ve held on to so tightly, for so long. My head falls to the mat as Luca swallows me down with another moan.

I’m lost to the overwhelming sensations as I come down from my high, my heart pounding and my breaths heavy.

Luca releases me from his mouth and sits back, keeping his hand on my thigh.

But as I look down at him, as his eyes travel up my body, I’m suddenly thrust back into reality.

What the fuck.

I move faster than I ever have before, as I stand up and fasten my shorts.

“Hey.” Luca stands too, holding his hands up to stop me.

“No.” I shake my head, not even able to look at him.

“Ty-”

“No!” I whirl around to face him. “What the *fuck*, Mitchell?”

“What do you mean, *what the fuck?*” He stares back at me, and I can’t tell if his expression is one of hurt or anger.

Both would be justified.

I rub a hand over my face and turn away from him, walking towards the locker room. I want to hate him for this… but I don’t. I don’t know what to think. All I do know is that I need to leave. I can’t be here right now.

I yank my locker door open and pull my hoodie on.

“Dude,” Luca’s voice sounds behind me, “you *wanted* that, you know you did.”

I don’t respond to him as I shove the rest of my clothes in my bag. Even though he’s right.

But as I turn to leave the locker room, he is standing in the doorway. And he looks concerned.

“This doesn’t have to be anything-”

“Fucking right it won’t be,” I snap at him and push him out of the way.

He easily steps aside, letting me leave. But he calls after me, “When you realize you liked it, I’ll be here.”

I forcefully push the door open and go straight to my car. There’s no fucking way I can be around him any more tonight.

But during the drive home, the emotions all roll in.

Confusion for having done that with not only a guy, but Luca. Anger for losing myself like that… Guilt, for leaving like I did.

Disappointment for potentially fucking this all up.

Lightness for having finally let go.

And that lingering sense of contentment…

Because truth is… I did enjoy that.

And I think I would do it again.

With him.

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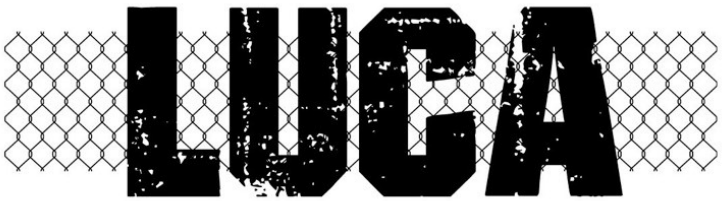
FIFTEEN



HOLY. *Fucking. Shit.*

The second the gym door closes behind Ty, I'm no longer playing it cool. Instead, I'm freaking the *fuck* out.

"Oh my god," I mutter to myself as I vigorously rub my hands over my face.

I sucked his *dick.* And he *liked* it.

Yeah, he freaked out and left, but it was obvious he was into it. He wanted it. He finally let go of everything that keeps him so closed off, and he let me in.

The way he opened his lips for me and pushed his tongue into my mouth… and his grip on my hair while I licked and sucked his cock… he was right there with me the whole time. For the first time in all the years I've known him, we weren't fighting against each other. And for the first time since we both came to this gym, we were in sync. His guard came down, and for a brief moment, he trusted me. And I trusted him.

My eyes finally move away from the gym door, as I accept that he's not coming back. And as I go through the motions of showering, changing and leaving the gym, I'm on autopilot. My thoughts keep bringing me back to the feeling of him against me, the taste of him on my tongue, his stubble against my cheek…

The real Ty came out to play tonight, and I want to know him. I want to know why he stays locked up, hiding behind a scowl and a need to control. Why he can't just let himself enjoy life… and why I was able to get it out of him.

I want more. I *need* more.

As I pull into my parking space at home, I lay my head back on the seat and blow out a breath of frustration.

Fuck. I'm in deep.

My phone starts buzzing, cutting off The Beastie Boys blaring through my kitchen. Annoyed, I glance at my phone to curse out whoever interrupted my jam session, as I was finally getting into a groove and forgetting the events of tonight. But a smile spreads across my face when I see my older sister's name lighting up the screen.

I wipe my hands and answer, putting her on speaker. "Hey."

"Hey, bud," Mia's voice comes through the speaker. "Wanted to catch you before you went to bed, hope I'm not waking you. We haven't had a chance to catch up lately."

"Yeah," I agree, "that's kind of my bad. I've been at the gym a lot."

"Well," she says, "I've also been working an insane amount, so-"

She's interrupted by the oven timer, and I reach out to turn it off.

"Are you baking?" she asks.

I pause my whisking and eye the phone warily. "Yes…"

Mia is silent for a moment before asking, "What's wrong?"

I sigh. "Nothing is wrong, I'm just baking, ok?"

"No, you don't just bake. You stress bake. And it's 10:30 at night."

"So?"

"So, what's wrong?"

"Nothing." I open the oven door and slide in a pan of cookies. Which will bring my total to thirty-six muffins and twenty-four cookies.

"Problems at the gym? Girl or boy trouble? Work?"

I huff and ignore her.

But she stays silent.

Damn her and her wisdom.

I scoff again and roll my head back. "Yeah, fine, there's a guy. But that's all I'm telling you. It's literally nothing, and after I bake my feels out, I'll be fine."

“Ok,” Mia says cheerily, happy she got me to, somewhat, admit to her what’s going on. “You always win them over, anyway. Bring him a muffin, I’m sure he’ll love it.”

“Hm.” I briefly picture Ty eating a muffin and I’m not sure why that turns me on. “Well, I’m also making cinnamon rolls, which is much more representative of me, so I’d rather see him eat that…” I chuckle at my own wittiness, but then sigh because of all the drama from tonight.

Would he ever eat my cinnamon roll…?

“Damn, he’s really in your head, isn’t he?”

“No,” I snap. Then sigh again. “Maybe. But, no, I said we weren’t talking about this.” I shoot the phone a scathing glare so hard I bet she can feel it. “Topic change, tell me about work.”

Mia chuckles. “Same as always. Crazy. Been working a lot of night shifts as one of the other ER doctors is on leave so, lucky me, I have the wonderful opportunity to pick up more time.”

“That sucks,” I mutter as I sprinkle cinnamon sugar over the dough for my cinnamon rolls.

“Tell me about it. Nadia is jealous,” Mia chuckles. “She thinks it sounds fun.”

I snort out a laugh. “She’s delusional.”

“Nah, she’s driven, just like the rest of the family. She’s *rocking* pre-med. I think our little sister may actually show us all up, Mom and Dad included.”

“Won’t take much to show me up,” I mumble, and immediately want to take that back.

“Luca,” Mia says in a sympathetic tone, and I wince.

“It’s fine.” I shrug to myself as I roll up my cinnamon rolls. “I like what I do, and I’ve accepted that being a *gym teacher* and *putting too much time into my hobbies* is disappointing. And if that’s what it takes to be a disappointment, then I am a-ok with that.”

“Luca,” Mia says again, but this time it’s scolding. “Mom and Dad are not disappointed in you.”

“Yeah?” I laugh. “I’m the only member of the family who’s not a doctor or working towards being one, and I think the phrase Dad used when I told them I was moving out here was… *potentially throwing my life away by chasing a hobby.*” I nod. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

Well, shit. Now I feel even worse about myself.

I think I'll make banana bread too.

"He's just a hardass. You know he just wants what's best for you. In his own, albeit wrong, way, he's just trying to make sure you'll be ok."

"This *is* what's best for me."

"I know. And I agree. We all love seeing you do the things that make you happy. You're a kickass teacher, and even if we don't really understand the whole MMA thing," she chuckles, "you're damn good at it and I'm so proud of you for *not* following in their footsteps and doing something you knew you wouldn't love." She pauses for a moment with a light laugh. "I can't picture you being a doctor anyway."

I shudder. "Yeah, me either." I set my knife down after slicing up my cinnamon rolls. "Thanks, Mia."

"Anytime, bud. So…"

"No."

"Please?"

"I told you, I'm not talking about it." I point the knife dramatically at the phone. "I'm holding a knife you know."

"Ok, ok," she laughs. "Well, it's getting late, I should go. I finally have a night off and I need some fucking sleep. Don't bake too late…"

"I won't," I say as I pull out the bananas to start mashing them up for banana bread.

"Sure," she says, and I can practically hear the eye roll. "Night, Luca. Talk again soon, ok?"

"You got it. Love you, Mia."

"Love you, too."

As I hang up the phone and The Beastie Boys fill my space again, I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. Because I have no notifications… and I was selfishly and secretly hoping for maybe a text from someone…

Which is fucking stupid. I shake my head and turn my attention back to my overflowing countertops. I have a job to do.

Operation distraction.

And you know what? Fuck him. I mean, yeah, I want to, but I mean like, *fuck him.* He *wants* this, and I know he is going to come to realize that. No one acts that way during a blowjob and turns around to say no thanks to another one.

I'm not going to sit around sulking and waiting for him. He knows where to find me when he's ready.

He’ll be back.
I know it.

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SIXTEEN

AS I TIGHTEN the last lug nut on my last car of the day, I feel both apprehension and relief. Apprehension, because now that the day is done, I have nothing to keep my mind from replaying those memories of last night. Relief, because I went too fucking hard today to keep those memories away. But now, as they flood in again, I notice a weird sort of… satisfied feeling under it all.

Which is confusing as fuck.

"Hey, guys." Bill enters the garage, just as I'm lowering the car from the lift, and Tim and Jake are finishing up in their bays as well. "We just had a car towed in, brakes are shot. I'm looking for a spot to fit it in tomorrow and wondering-"

"I'll take it now," I say quickly, turning to face him.

Bill cocks an eyebrow. "Right now? We're done for the day."

I shrug one shoulder, trying to look unbothered, and not as desperate as I feel to keep my mind busy. "I'll stay. Tomorrow is just as full as today was. I don't mind."

Tim crosses his arms and observes me cautiously. "Not training tonight?"

I shake my head, looking down at my hands as I wipe them on my rag. "I don't have anything planned."

Well, not any more… since I'm avoiding the gym…

"I can stay and help you," Jake says with a smile. "We'll knock it out and get out of here in time for dinner."

"It's alright." I shake my head again. It's a nice offer, but I *want* this to take a long time. And I want to be alone. "It's probably just a brake pad and

rotor replacement."

"Still, I don't mind." Jake shrugs and gives me an expectant look, like he's waiting for me to say yes.

And now I find myself in yet another position to be the asshole I am. "Really, it's ok," I insist, and he nods thoughtfully.

I quickly drop my eyes again, wiping the grease from my wrench with my rag. I know that look. The one where people try to figure out *why* I'm the asshole. I could also say that I don't want him to stay because he has kids and he should be home with them, not here working late just because I want to. But I don't. Inviting that connection in will only end up in disappointment, and I'd rather save both of us from that.

"Alright, well, thanks Ty," Bill says, turning to leave the garage. "Just leave the work order on the front desk when you're done."

"Ok," I say, nodding to him as he leaves. But not before he shoots one more cautionary glance my way.

"I'll bring the car in for you before I go," Tim offers, and heads out after Bill before I can protest.

"Thanks," I say after him, feeling bad that now he is helping when it's something *I* am choosing to do.

"Well, hopefully you're not here too late." Jake smiles at me. "And hey, some weekend when you're free, you'll have to come over for a barbeque. My wife makes a mean rack of ribs."

I give him a weak smile. "Thanks. I'll let you know."

"Awesome. Don't stay too late," he says over his shoulder as he heads towards the door. "See you in the morning."

"Later." I watch him as he leaves, and the usual guilt trickles in. I like these guys, and if things were different, I might take them up on their offers and joke around with them during the workday.

But things aren't different.

Once everyone has left and the car is up on the lift, I check my watch. It's 5:30, so everyone is probably getting to the gym by now. I cast a glance to my phone on my workbench, but quickly look away. I haven't checked it all day. Not only because I've been busy… but because of what I'm avoiding. I don't know what I'm going to see on there, but there are some things I'm not ready for.

"*Let go, Ty. Try it,*" Luca's voice echoes through my thoughts as the memory of last night seeps in. Luca on top of me, his tongue in my mouth,

his lips wrapped around my dick…

"Ugh," I groan as I squeeze my eyes tight and rub a hand over my face.

Fuck. Why? Why did I do that? Why did I like it? And why did it have to be *him*? I've never done anything with a guy before, and never had any urge to. But his touch and kiss rustled something alive deep within me, and I've never just… *let go* like that before.

But I *can't.* He's fucking with my progress, and for the first time in years, I fucked up a simple takedown. Because of *him*. I *can't* let that happen again.

"Fucking Luca Mitchell," I mutter to myself as I pick up the wheel wrench and go back to work.

As I work on replacing the completely worn-out rotors and brake pads – *how does anyone even let it get this bad?* – I push every thought of that fucker out of my head, and just enjoy the complete silence in the garage. The sounds of my tools falling to the bench echoes around me, and the noise from the compressor easily takes over the space with no competing sounds. It's peaceful, and allows me to focus on my task, and nothing else. Which is exactly what I need.

By the time I finish with the car, it's almost 8:00. And my eyes slide once more to my phone sitting on my workbench.

The stillness around me is now serving a completely different purpose. Because now that I don't have a job to do, it's reminding me of everything I'm trying to forget. It's just me and my thoughts as I stare at my phone, and that's a dangerous place to be.

So, I cave.

My pulse thunders in my ears as I pick up my phone and scroll through the screen full of missed notifications. But disappointment settles in the pit of my stomach, as I see that the only notifications are from the group chat.

"Get over yourself, what the fuck," I mumble, throwing my phone back onto the bench and turning to lower the car from the lift.

I'm not sure why I'm torturing myself over this. It was nothing. Luca is fucking weird, so this is probably just something he does. And now he'll get the last laugh. Because he *knew* that would fuck with my head.

Well, he was right…

And as my phone vibrates with a text, I'm apparently in the mood to punish myself even more, because my eyes immediately fly to the screen.

ROSA

Luca and Ty, are you guys coming to the gym tomorrow? We need to figure out how we're all watching the fights this weekend! Missed you guys tonight

What the fuck? He wasn't even there tonight? I immediately pick up my phone and scroll through the texts in the group chat from the day. And there it is.

LUCA

I won't be in tonight, guys. First hockey game in my new rec league!

Mother*fucker.* I could have gone in tonight, because he wasn't even fucking *there.* A huge sigh escapes me, and just as I'm about to set my phone down, I pause. I scroll up a little further to the texts from this morning, to a selfie sent from Luca.

He's in a kitchen, with a huge smile and holding his thumb up in front of a bunch of muffins and cookies.

Got some treats for y'all. Went a little wild last night *cookie emoji*

My eyes roam the photo, as I take in the mess of flour, bowls and utensils on the counter next to the pile of baked goods. Then, I look at him. His hair is a wild mess, his eyes bright and his smile beaming. It's not the smile he usually gives me. This is a real, genuine, happy smile. But my heart flutters as I realize that I *have* seen that smile. I've seen that one aimed my way more often recently, compared to the cocky, taunting, annoying as fuck grin I usually get.

And he bakes? What the fuck?

I set my phone back down on the bench and work on cleaning up.

Ignore him, forget him. It's nothing.

But it isn't.

He has been able to do something no one has ever been able to do. He made me forget and *let go.* I lost control, and I let him take it. I lost my head, and it felt good.

He felt good.

And I can't stop thinking about it. About him. I hate that he was the one to make me feel good, and feel like myself, for the first time in a long time.

I hate him… and I also hate that I want him.

My eyes once again find his selfie that is still open on my phone screen. As I look at his smile, I'm reminded of the all the words he has said to me since we started working together. The subtle and not so subtle hints at being interested, and the way his eyes roam over my body.

"It should be obvious by now, Tyler, that I think you're hot."

I'm surprised by the excitement I feel at those words, and not only because I've always considered myself straight. For some reason, that doesn't even seem to matter to me. The fact I am feeling excitement at all is overriding every question I have about why I enjoyed having a guy suck my dick. My biggest hang up is that it's *Luca* causing this excitement.

Suddenly a new text comes through the group chat, and my stomach flips as Luca's smile fills the screen with a new selfie.

Dominated tonight! And hell yeah, we'll make a plan tomorrow!

He's wearing hockey gear in the photo, holding up a peace sign with a huge smile. His hair is damp with sweat and sticking out in every direction, and I can't help but let a small smile form on my lips.

"*Let go, Ty…*"

I zoom in on the photo, to the sign on the wall behind him.

Kirkwood Rink.

That just happens to be around the corner from here…

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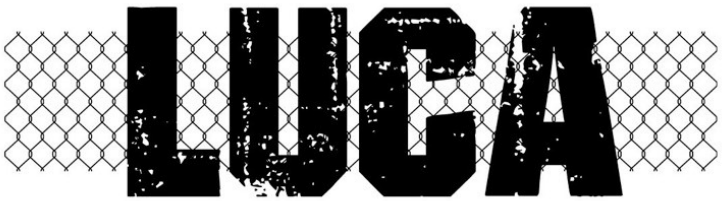
SEVENTEEN



"YOU'RE COMING NEXT WEEK, RIGHT?" Dan asks me as we exit the dressing room in the arena.

"Fucking right I am." I give him a big smile. "After that win, I'm hooked. That was awesome."

"Sick." He holds out a fist for me to bump, and I adjust my hockey bag on my shoulder to oblige. "You working tomorrow?" he asks.

"I haven't had a call yet, so unless something comes through in the morning, I'm not too sure." I shrug. I've been thinking about this all day. I baked *hard* last night, worked today, and then had hockey this evening, so I haven't given myself time to obsess too much over a certain brooding bastard. But maybe *I* should brood for a bit. It might help.

Or make it worse…

"Well, if you do come in, I'll see you tomorrow. Otherwise, maybe we'll grab a beer or something soon," Dan says as we make our way out of the arena and into the now dark parking lot outside.

"Absolutely," I nod in agreement, "just let me know when."

"Awesome. Well, have a good night." Dan smiles and gives a little wave as he heads towards his car.

"Night," I call to him, as I turn towards my Jeep.

I sigh, shifting my stick to my other hand so I can adjust the bag on my shoulder again. As I walk in the dark, nearly empty parking lot, the silence consumes me. I hate silence. It fuels the mess in my head and forces me to think the things I've been trying *not* to think about. Things like –

Ty Roscoe.

I stop suddenly before my Jeep, my heart nearly stopping as well.

He’s leaning against the driver’s side door, arms crossed, and looking all kinds of sexy in black jeans and a black hoodie. He doesn’t say anything, as he just stands there, observing me.

“What are you doing?” I ask, breaking the silence, and hating that I’m the one to do it. *He’s* the one leaning against *my* car.

“You send a lot of selfies,” he says simply, as if that’s an explanation for anything.

But I smirk in satisfaction. “You clearly like that.”

Ty scoffs and then tilts his head towards the street. “I work around the corner.”

I nod thoughtfully, still trying to figure out why he’s here, *and* trying hard not to let my hopes get too high. “You didn’t go to the gym tonight.”

His arms are still crossed as he leans against my Jeep, but I see the tension enter his shoulders and his fingers grip his biceps. “No.”

“Why?”

He stares back at me, and my heart rate quickens.

I drop my hockey bag to the ground and take a step towards him. “Why didn’t you go to the gym tonight, Ty?”

Even in the dark, I see something flash through his dark brown eyes. And I think that something is vulnerability.

He blinks it away and raises his chin slightly. “Why did you bake for a fucking bakery last night?”

Touché.

But I stay quiet and tilt my head as I observe him, needing him to answer my question first.

A breath escapes him as he drops his eyes from mine. “You’re in my head.”

Warmth spreads through my chest, but I just nod.

Ty brings his eyes back to mine, and I’m surprised to see the vulnerability remains. “I can’t let you distract me. I’m here for a reason, and I can’t fuck this up.”

“Why do you think you’ll fuck it up?” I ask.

His jaw clenches as he continues to stare back at me.

I step forward again, getting dangerously close to him. “You liked it.”

He blinks and starts to lower his gaze once again, but I take the final step towards him so there are mere inches between us. “Admit it, Ty. You want this.”

His eyes flick between mine, and I smirk as I see the heat building within him. The same heat I feel inside myself.

Ty slowly raises his hand and wraps it around my throat. My chin lifts, allowing him to take hold of me, and my heart thunders. He takes his lower lip between his teeth as his eyes drop to his hand, the pressure on my throat slowly increasing.

Suddenly, he grips me tight and turns, pressing my back against the Jeep. “I’ve been trying to figure out why it’s you. *You* of all people piss me off more than anything, but it’s *you* who also pushes me to go against everything I know.”

I take a breath in, my throat straining against his hand. Now that we’ve switched spots, I can barely see his face in the dark. But the tone of his voice tells me there’s a hardness in his eyes.

“Like I said before, Tyler,” I say in a low voice, keeping my eyes on the darkness that has taken over him, “there’s a reason I get under your skin.”

He swallows hard and nods, gripping my throat even tighter and pulling a small wheeze from me.

“I don’t know why I’m here.”

The softness of his voice, in contrast with his dominating stance and tight grip, is alarming.

I reach my hand out and run my fingers down his abs. “I do.”

He gazes back at me, and I wish I could see his eyes. Just when I think he’s going to step backwards, he closes the small distance between us, and his lips are on mine.

Our kiss is messy and heated as he presses me against the Jeep with his body, and I pull him in for even more. As his hand falls from my throat, I take a deep breath in, and a surge of electricity runs through me.

One of his hands is in my hair, his other on my hip, while mine run up his back. I can feel the tension leaving his body as he once again relinquishes his need to be in control, and I feel *him* under my touch. We’re greedily taking everything we can from each other, and I want more, and more.

His hips press against mine, and in my desperate need to take everything I can, I drop my hands to his ass to grind into him. The grunt that escapes him is music to my fucking ears. The neediness of his touch on my body intensifies and our kiss somehow deepens even more.

Our breaths are heavy, and the urgency is only increasing for both of us. I feel it in him. And I definitely feel it in me.

He suddenly pushes me forcefully against the Jeep and takes a step backwards, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. That disappointed feeling starts in the pit of my stomach again, but when I see the small smirk playing on his lips, I smile.

“I have to go.” He takes another step backwards and gestures with his head to his car a few spaces away.

A breath of amusement escapes me as I reach down and adjust my hard cock in my pants. “So, you’re just going to turn me on and run?”

Ty shrugs one shoulder, then turns and walks to his car. He stops as he opens the door and looks me up and down. “Fuck you, Mitchell.”

I chuckle. “Fuck you, too.”

I watch as he gets into his car, and leaves me standing in the dark parking lot, all hot and bothered and desperate for more.

Well. Here we fucking go.

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EIGHTEEN

THE PARKING LOT at the gym is full, meaning everyone is already here. As it was another busy day at work, it took me a little longer than usual to get out of there. Good thing I took that car last night… and maybe this means I can convince Bill to let me work some weekends to fill some of my spare time.

As I walk through the parking lot to the gym door, my eyes scan the row of cars, landing on the one that makes me feel a thrum of anticipation. The red Jeep with the stickers all over the rear door.

My gaze rests on the driver's side door, and the memory of last night rushes in. The feeling of my body against his as I pressed him up against it, and the feeling of him grinding against me…

I have no idea what took over me last night. Something within me told me I needed to go there and see him. And when I saw him walking towards me, my heart started pounding in my chest and my hands felt an urgent need to touch him.

Then he opened his mouth.

But shoving my tongue in it shut him up quick enough.

As I pull the gym door open, that now familiar war starts up inside me once again. A battle between the need to seek him out or avoid him.

I don't know what this all means. But what I do know, is that when it's just the two of us, the urgency takes over and *it* controls *me*. And last night, I let it. Because that feeling of *letting go* is addicting. And there are worse things to be addicted to.

Right?

"Hey, Ty," Adão's voice sounds as I enter the locker room.

I look up to see everyone standing around at their lockers getting ready to train. I'm met with a round of greetings and I quickly nod my head at them, heading straight for my locker and opening the door so I can hide behind it.

There's a brief beat of silence, before everyone continues with their conversation. *Thank God.*

"So, we really do need to figure out where we are watching the fights tomorrow night," Rosa says as I pull my shorts out of my bag.

"I'd offer my place but it's tiny." Elijah sighs.

Since I came straight from work, I head into the attached bathroom and shower space to wash the grease from my hands and get changed. And the whole time, I feel Luca's eyes on me.

Everyone continues making their plan for tomorrow night, and I internally roll my eyes. Why do they do everything together? Is every night spent together in the gym not enough? Do these people ever just have alone time?

"Wherever we go, I don't care. I'm just pumped to see Blaese come out on top," Seb chimes in.

I can agree with that one. Tomas Blaese is one of my favorite fighters in the UFC, as I love his gritty, yet tight, style of fighting. He's strong in both grappling and striking, making him an excellent all-round fighter. He always seems to be able to anticipate his opponent, yet he remains present every step of the way.

He's exactly what I aspire to be. And being here is what's going to get me one step closer to being able to fight at his level, and in the UFC.

And the *missing piece* to this puzzle I am trying to solve cuts through my thoughts as I re-enter the locker room.

"Let's watch at my place," Luca says, and I try to ignore him as I shove my clothes in my locker.

"Yeah, you don't mind?" Rosa asks eagerly.

"Not at all, I have the space and lots of baked goods to serve," Luca chuckles.

I grab my wraps, close my locker door, and turn to head into the gym.

"Ty?" Noah asks in his soft voice. "You going to come?"

I stop, looking around at the hopeful faces all staring back at me. My eyes briefly meet Luca's, but I quickly drop them to the wraps in my hands and shake my head. "No."

“Aw,” Rosa pouts, “we’d love to see you outside the gym sometime!”

“Yeah, I mean, unless you have some other awesome plans, you should come.” Elijah smiles widely as I glance at him.

I sigh at that thought. I don’t have any plans to watch the fights because I don’t have a TV and I can’t stand watching anything in a bar around drunk idiots, when you can’t even hear anything. And I need to watch these fights, as I’ve been looking forward to this card since it was announced months ago. Which means I’ll likely be trying to watch them on my phone at home.

“I’m good, thanks,” I say, bringing my gaze back down as I move to leave the locker room again.

But I stop when Luca asks, “So where will you watch them?”

I shoot him a look as he adopts his cocky as fuck smirk. “Does it matter?”

He shrugs innocently. “Just wondering. Maybe we’d rather join your plans.”

I narrow my eyes at him as he crosses his arms and casually tilts his head, waiting.

Prick.

“I don’t know yet,” I grit out.

“Ah!” He dramatically holds his hands out wide. “So you are free to join us. Perfect.”

Just as I’m about to leave the locker room for real this time, Rosa steps forward. “Please, Ty? I really would love for you to join.”

I glance once more around the room as everyone smiles back at me. I don’t get it. I’m actively trying to keep everyone at a distance, yet they just keep trying to get closer. Why?

Luca cocks an eyebrow at me, his features softening, ever so slightly.

I swallow and look down at Rosa. “Maybe.”

Rosa smiles and nods. “Awesome.”

“Hm.” Luca shakes his head. “I’m sorry but, I’m going to need a concrete answer. I take my hosting responsibilities *very* seriously, and I need numbers in order to effectively prepare. I’ll need to confirm this with you tonight.” He raises his wrist to check his watch, which he’s not even wearing. “Actually, right now.”

If we weren’t in the gym and surrounded by witnesses, I would launch myself across this locker room and beat him into the floor.

He easily slides his cocky smirk back into place, and light dances in his eyes. He's fucking with me, and we both know it.

We also both know it's working.

And *fuck*, I really do need to watch these fights. And my only two options - my phone or a bar - fucking suck.

I also can't ignore an interesting feeling creeping in at the thought of being in Luca's apartment.

My brain is truly fucked.

I grit my teeth and narrow my eyes at him. "Fine."

A massive grins spreads across his face. "*Fine*," he says in a mocking tone. His smile then transitions from taunting to something else.

Something almost like excitement.

"Amazing!" Rosa reaches out and grasps my arm. "Ah, I'm excited."

I offer her a weak smile, and everyone else taps my shoulder while sharing their excitement as they file past me into the gym.

Leaving just Luca and I in the locker room.

He huffs out a breath of laughter.

"What," I practically spit at him.

"That was painful." He nods seriously. "Painful for you, and to watch."

I just glare at him, unable to say anything without acting on my thoughts from earlier and pounding him into the ground.

"Tomorrow night will be a shitshow won't it?" He widens his eyes in mock terror.

I shrug, turning away from him and walking towards the door. "Fine, I won't come."

He's suddenly in front of me, his hand pressing against my chest. I look down at it and will my heart to stay calm.

"Come," he says softly.

A sigh escapes me, as I raise my eyes to his. I take in the hope shining through them, and briefly glance down at his lips. His fingers tighten slightly on my chest, and my heart ignores me completely as it increases its pace.

A noise outside the locker room door has us stepping away from each other, but our eyes stay locked.

I keep his gaze for a moment longer before I give him a slight nod. He smiles and steps aside, letting me leave the locker room.

As I head to the boxing ring to work with Del, I feel an overwhelming anticipation thinking about tomorrow night. And I can't tell if it's positive or negative.

But I push it all aside as we work through some drills. I'm here to train, not make friends. I'm going to watch the fights, not develop a social circle. No expectations, I just need to focus on what's important. Which is being here, in this gym, and training to be the best fighter I can be.

With every punch to Del's pads, I tighten up my thoughts and bring my awareness back to where it's supposed to be.

Cross, lead hook, cross, step back, cross.

When Del adds slips to my drill, I'm thankful for the added physical and mental focus required to let his punches pass by me.

Because I can't ignore the electric tingle I feel whenever my eyes land on Luca and they sweep over his body. And the stab of annoyance whenever I see him easily block a punch and land a roundhouse kick in one breath.

My training comes first. This is why I'm here.

But *fuck.*

He's got a hold on me.

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NINETEEN

OF COURSE, Luca lives in a nice apartment building, in a nice neighborhood, close to downtown and to the gym. Figures, since everything else is so perfect and easy for him, why wouldn't his living situation be perfect as well.

I finally get out of my car after sitting in it for ten minutes and walk to the front door of the building. The fights are starting in a few minutes, and I purposely timed this so I wouldn't have to be there early and make small talk with everyone. I successfully avoided everyone, especially Luca, this afternoon in the gym to prepare myself for whatever this is going to be tonight.

And I've been avoiding him so I can stop fucking up. Luca and I haven't rolled or sparred since he… well, sucked my dick. And while I am coming to terms with the fact that I *did* enjoy it - I'm the one that went to find him in a dark parking lot after all - I am delaying the inevitable. We need to work together. It's unacceptable that I am letting something distract me and keep me from performing to the level I am capable of, and I can't just continue to ignore this.

Which is why I also entered the grappling tournament, so I can apply some outside pressure to get my head back in the game. So this means I need to start preparing for it as well.

With him.

I'm buzzed through the front door and make my way to the elevator. But on the ride up to the third floor, I start to question myself.

Why am I here? I don't need a TV to watch the fights. This is going to be a disaster, I don't need to put myself and everyone through this…

But I continue my way down the hall and find apartment number 323. There's laughter on the other side of the door, and I stay out here in the hallway for a moment longer, listening to everyone enjoy themselves.

This is going to be fucking torture.

I'm just here to watch the fights, and then I'm leaving.

Unless there's a reason I won't want to leave…

Nope. I'm not here for this, I'll just get it on my phone and watch at home like I should have, this is stupid.

But the second I turn away from the door to leave, I come face to face with Seb.

"Hey," he smiles, "you made it!"

"Uh, hey." I glance past him towards the elevator.

"Nice to know someone else is late, so I'm not the last one." Seb chuckles as he moves past me and knocks on the door.

"Oh, I-" I start, but the door opens.

"There you are!" Rosa stares at us both in disbelief. "Come on, you're *so* late." She steps aside for us to enter, which Seb does immediately.

I hang back for a second, trying to think of an excuse to leave.

Rosa smiles softly at me and tilts her head in a motion for me to come in. "Glad you could make it, Ty."

I give her a tight nod and resign to my fate, entering Luca's apartment.

And it's definitely Luca's apartment.

It's colorful and chaotic, with plants *everywhere*, string lights, flowers on the table, different colored curtains on every window…

And the asshole himself leaning against the kitchen counter smirking at me.

"Glad you made it!" Adão smiles at me as he exits the kitchen and heads into the living room, where a large TV is flashing the UFC logo to indicate the beginning of the fights.

Alright, that's better than my phone…

"Hey," I say awkwardly, as everyone else waves and shouts a greeting from their seats in the living room.

Luca pushes himself off the counter and opens his fridge. He then silently holds out a beer for me.

I take it, and he shoots his annoying cocky smile at me.

"There's nothing here to prevent me from wiping that off your fucking face," I say in a low voice, gripping my beer bottle tightly.

“With your hands, or…?” His eyes drop briefly to my lips, before he takes a swig of his beer and turns to head into the living room.

I take a deep breath and follow him, pushing down the subtle excitement at that thought.

Luca plops into a chair, and Noah smiles at me, scooting down the couch so I can sit.

The preliminary fights are getting underway and as the fighters enter the octagon, I take a drink of my beer and glance around the living room. It looks like everyone has been here for a while as the coffee table is full of snacks, including Luca’s baking he did the other night. I huff out a small breath of amusement, as I think once more about the reason for this baking.

“Cinnamon roll?” Luca’s voice cuts through my thoughts.

I look up at him and he is eyeing me, almost hopefully.

“Uh, no.” I shake my head and take another drink of my beer.

“Hm,” he hums, nodding his head as he leans back in his chair. “Maybe later.” He then winks at me.

Fucking weirdo.

“Oh, I love this guy,” Adão says as he pops a chip into his mouth and gestures towards the TV.

A fighter from Brazil, who is a fucking beast from what I’ve seen of him, is entering the cage. I watch as the first fight of the night begins, and try to tune everyone out as they continue chatting and laughing about some inside joke they all have about the same kind of fight shorts one of the fighters is wearing. They’re just normal fight shorts… I don’t get what’s so funny about it.

Everyone laughs as Elijah says, “But do they have a zipper?” and now I’m even more confused. And a jolt of something like annoyance, or possibly… jealousy… hits me.

Fuck, maybe the crowded bar would have been better.

When the fight ends in submission, my eyes slide to Luca. He’s smiling and joking, and looks genuinely happy. Like this is exactly what he’s supposed to be doing. Hosting friends at his house and being the outgoing social butterfly he obviously is. But, seeing it in real time brings a different feeling. I only know him from the gym or from fights over the years, and this whole situation is completely foreign to me.

Even seeing him in jeans rather than sweats or shorts brings on a curious feeling, and I find myself scanning his living room looking for more

clues about who he is outside of MMA. I see a PlayStation with sports games lined up beside it, various books on a shelf beside the TV and a framed picture on the wall of the St. Louis Arena.

“Oh!” Seb yells from beside Noah on the couch and I snap to it, bringing my attention back to the TV just in time to see the end of an epic takedown.

I shift my weight in my seat and scold myself. I’m here to watch the *fights,* and instead I’m watching Luca fucking Mitchell and eyeing his belongings. *What the fuck.*

I keep my eyes on the TV for the remainder of the preliminary fights, studying their techniques and mistakes, and living each moment with each fighter. Every now and then my attention is pulled as someone directs a comment my way about how Lozano has a similar fight style to me, or when Seb gets me another beer, but overall, I stay focused on the reason I’m here. And when we get to the main card fights, I’m leaning forward with my elbows on my knees, just like everyone else.

The first fight is Yanna Trujillo and Amelia Hendrix, and as they come onto the screen, Rosa rubs her hands together and smiles around at all of us.

“These ladies are about to show you boys just how this is done. Pay attention.”

I can’t help the small chuckle that comes out of me. Because I fully agree. I’ve seen both of these women fight a few times before, and they are fucking amazing. Trujillo has one of the best single leg takedowns I’ve ever seen, and Hendrix is so strong on defense it’s almost like she plays it just to prolong the fight and have some fun.

And from what I’ve seen from Rosa, she’s soon going to be rising the ranks to dominate these women. During a *light* spar the other day, I almost had to ask for a fucking break to catch my breath.

“Oh my god,” Luca mutters as the fight begins, and it’s immediately tense.

Trujillo takes Hendrix down in the first thirty seconds, but Hendrix manages to lay a deadly punch and buys herself a moment to get into position for an attempted triangle choke. They’re quick, and the room is completely silent as we watch.

Eventually Hendrix gets Trujillo into an armbar, resulting in a tap.

“Yes!” Rosa shoots to her feet and raises her arms in the air. “Fuck, yes!”

I hide my smile as I take a drink of my beer.

“Damn,” Noah says softly and smiles up at Rosa. “Wait til you get there.”

“Damn right,” Rosa says, beaming as she takes her seat again.

Luca gets up to head into the kitchen, and I let my eyes follow him. He loads his arms up with beers from the fridge, and as he turns back to the living room, I quickly return my attention to the TV.

“Alright, here we go,” Elijah scoots to the edge of his chair, as Tomas Blaese enters the octagon.

My heart thumps faster as he touches hands with his opponent. And as the fight begins, I’m consumed by it. Blaese moves with speed and accuracy, yet completely dominates his opponent by keeping him on his defense. He is the one controlling this fight, and each of his moves are calculated and precise.

Every time I see him fight, I’m reminded of every reason why I want this. Why I need this. I need to fight at this level, and be challenged by other elite fighters, so I can prove myself and my worth in the world of MMA. And that I deserve to be there because I’ve done the work. To prove this to everyone, and myself. Fighting in that octagon is the only thing that matters to me. I *need* to get there.

The second Blaese lands a left hook to his opponent’s head, I’m on my feet along with everyone else. And as his opponent falls to the octagon floor, my hands are in my hair and there’s a smile on my face. Blaese wins with a knockout. Everyone in the room is cheering and as I pull my eyes from the TV, they meet Luca’s.

He is looking back at me with a genuine smile, and it takes a moment longer until my own smile eventually fades away. He keeps his eyes on me as his features soften, until I’m jolted back to the moment by Noah bumping my arm.

“That was awesome,” he says, smiling at me.

“Yeah, it was.” I nod in agreement and take my seat again.

Adão whoops and claps his hands together. “Fuck, man, that’s why he’s the best.”

I take the last drink of my beer and glance at my watch. Fights are over. What is proper protocol here? Can I just leave now?

The uncomfortable feelings settle in again now that the fights are done, and I have nothing to keep my interest and attention. Everyone starts talking

about the fights and their own training, but I'm having a hard time paying attention to them. I just want to go now, but I don't want to be a *complete* dick and leave when they're in the middle of a conversation. And the fights ended just minutes ago.

"I actually want to work more on power in my left hook. And not just because Blaese made it look so easy tonight," Elijah laughs. He turns to Seb. "You up for a spar tomorrow?"

"So you can land your left hook on me with more power?" Seb says with a mouthful of cookie. "Oh yeah, sounds super fun."

"Sick, it's on." Elijah nods seriously, draining the last of his beer while Seb rolls his eyes.

"Speaking of," Rosa stands, "I do actually want to train some tomorrow afternoon, so I should head out and stop drinking and eating sugar." She shoots a look at Luca, who just laughs.

"Yeah, me too," Noah says, standing as well. "Need a lift?"

"That'd be great, thanks." Rosa smiles and they head towards the door, while everyone calls out their good-byes to them.

Adão, Seb and Elijah also stand, and *thank fuck*, now I can just leave with everyone else.

But as I stand, Luca catches my eye and shakes his head.

And that subtle excited feeling comes back.

"Well, thanks for having us, Luca. You may need to host all the fights," Seb says with a chuckle as he makes his way towards the door.

"I'm fine with that," Luca says with a proud smile.

Elijah looks at me. "Did you drive here, or do you need-"

"Ty is going to stay so we can play chess," Luca says matter-of-factly, as he puts his hands in his pockets.

I try to keep the look of bewilderment off my face, as I glare back at him, wondering what the fuck he's talking about.

"Chess?" Adão cocks an eyebrow.

Luca nods. "Yeah, working on burying the hatchet, you know? What better way to do that than with chess?"

I'm clearly not alone in the struggle to follow this logic, as the other guys slowly nod and look between us cautiously.

"Ok…" Elijah says slowly. "Um, well… be… safe?"

"Scouts honor." Luca salutes him and Elijah chuckles. He then turns to me, eyeing me carefully.

I shrug one shoulder with a slight shake of my head to show that I am not completely on board with this.

Which is probably a lie.

“Alright, well,” Seb opens the door, “see you tomorrow?”

“Yup,” Luca nods, “thanks for coming.”

As the door closes after them, Luca turns and heads into the kitchen. He’s silent, as I simply stand there, waiting for an explanation.

He grabs two more beers from the fridge and walks over to me, handing me one. “You could have left.”

I don’t move to take the beer and stare back at him. “I still can.”

He smirks, still holding the beer out between us. “Door’s right there.”

We continue to hold each other’s gazes, and I take in the playful look in his. My eyes drop to his lips, and the excitement grows.

I reach up and take the beer from him, and he smiles. “You do know how to play chess right?”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” I ask as he heads into the living room and pulls out a chessboard.

“Well,” he sets it on the couch and gestures for me to sit, “I think it’s time we get to know each other a little better if we’re going to continue venturing into dick sucking territory.” His eyes travel down my body and back up. “Know thine enemy, isn’t that the saying?”

“Know thy self, know thy enemy,” I correct him.

He shrugs it off with a wave of his hand and sits on the couch. “Each capture comes with a question for the other, which *must* be answered.” He gives me a daring look and lowers his voice. “What do you say, Tiger?”

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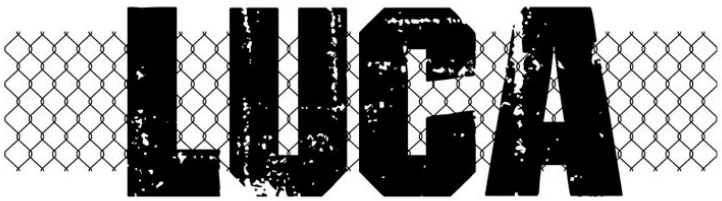
TWENTY



THE POUNDING in my chest intensifies as Ty just stands there, unopened beer in his hand and a salty look on his face.

But eventually, he steps forward and joins me on the couch with the chessboard between us.

"What kind of questions?" he asks, opening his beer and eyeing the chessboard.

"Whatever you want." I open my beer as well and take a drink. "I'm sure there's something about me you're just *dying* to know."

Ty huffs and shakes his head without looking at me.

"Well, since you're clearly so excited about this, you get to go first." I gesture at the board to where the white pieces are in place before him.

He doesn't even react, and just simply reaches out, moving his knight first.

"Oh," I look up at him with eyebrows raised, "interesting."

Ty shoots me a look. "What."

"Well… seeing as you're so uptight and in control all the time, it's quite interesting that your first move is one that gives *me* more ways to respond and lowers your chances of taking this game in the direction you want." I press my lips together and await his response.

This ought to be good.

He narrows his eyes at me. "*Or,* it gives me more flexibility with my pawns."

"Hm." I nod thoughtfully. "Tyler Roscoe and flexibility. Never would have thought those two things go together…"

"Just go," Ty sighs as he takes a drink of his beer.

“Of course.” I move my pawn into the center space and smile.

Wow, maybe he doesn’t even know how to play?

But no, he does. And I, of course, find myself trying to protect my little pawns and peeps from his attacks as he moves into my space. We play in silence while we wait for the first capture, the tension rising… but not uncomfortably. It’s almost like a welcome and comforting silence, and I’m surprised to realize that I haven’t even put music on. Usually I hate quiet, but something about this silent game is just doing it for me.

And then, my god… I got him. I capture one of his pawns, and he sighs.

“Hm…” I hum while I observe him. “What do I want to know…”

Ty stares back at me, blank faced and waiting, as I draw this out as long as I can.

“Hm…” I hum again.

“Just ask a fucking question,” he snaps.

I smile at him with a chuckle. “Ok. What’s your favorite color?”

Ty looks back at me incredulously. “That’s your question?”

“Ah,” I hold up a finger, “no questions, only answers. And you have to be honest. No lying, Ty. This is serious business.”

Ty sighs for the hundredth time in the past hour, I swear, and shrugs. “Uh… red, I guess.”

I nod seriously. “Yeah, I can see that. That fits.”

He doesn’t respond, instead dropping his eyes to the board and capturing my pawn in the next move.

Which I *totally* saw coming…

He keeps his eyes cast down as he chews his bottom lip for a moment. The anticipation builds within me as I observe him, waiting to hear what he wants to know.

“You’re bi?” he asks, still looking down.

“I am.” I nod, my heart now thrashing in my chest. The fact that *that* was his first question has me all kinds of excited.

Ty nods thoughtfully, and I reach out to make my next move. Because I know what my next question is.

After a couple moves between us, I capture another one of his pawns. I briefly think about easing into it, but nah. The color thing was a solid start, plus he’s the one that brought us into sexual territory in the first place.

“Are you?” I ask.

He finally looks up at me and gives a slight shake of his head, his expression somewhat thoughtful. “Never thought I was.”

I can read between those lines. He’s bi for *me*. I’ve *awakened* him. And I feel damn good about that.

I smile at him. “Gotcha.”

His eyes briefly drop to my smile, then down to the board again to make his move.

But on my next turn, I make another epic capture. Of a pawn, but still. Epic, because I’m going for it. It’s time to get to the real stuff. The stuff I’ve always wanted to know about Ty.

“Why don’t you celebrate your wins?”

His eyes shoot up to meet mine. And I see a wall slam up behind them.

Well, shit.

Who would have thought that he’d be more open about his apparent bi-awakening than this…

“You have to answer,” I say slowly, and more carefully than I intended.

He blinks and looks out into the room. “Because there’s no point in celebrating every step along the way. It’s not the end, and when I get to the end, I’ll celebrate.”

I nod. “Rather than take a moment to appreciate the step you just achieved. Got it, sounds healthy.”

He looks at me again. “The end goal is what matters to me. I just don’t see a reason to celebrate every fight I win to get there.”

“And when people try to celebrate you?” I ask, taking a drink of my beer.

“One question only.” He drops his eyes to the board again to take his turn.

Hm. Noted. Follow up questions are locked and loaded…

After a couple more moves, Ty captures one of my fucking knights.

“Well, fuck,” I murmur. “I liked that one too. He was gallant.”

Ty furrows his brow at the knight as he picks it up, then sets it aside without fully appreciating him.

“What did you mean when you said not everything has to have a meaning or purpose?” he asks, looking straight at me.

I stare back at him for a moment, trying to school my expression from annoyance to one of indifference. But he apparently sees right through that, as he eyes me while waiting for my answer.

I shrug. “That not everything has to be planned to death and sometimes it’s better to just do the things that make you happy.”

Ty continues to watch me and wait.

“What?” I ask, annoyed again.

It’s his turn to shrug. “I thought we were being honest.”

“That is honest,” I snap at him. “It’s what I meant.”

“Hm.” Ty nods.

I sigh forcefully and take my turn, capturing another of his pawns.

I’d like to get one of *his* knights…

“So, when you *do* achieve your end goal, who will celebrate you?”

He is silent for a moment before he adjusts in his seat and makes his next move as he says, “Myself.”

Well, now I have a million more questions.

And the fucker now gets my other knight. I’m either really not paying attention here or he is a secret chess genius.

“How are you able to just *do the things that make you happy*?” he asks.

And once again I’m reeling in my anger. “I’ll allow you to clarify that question,” I say tightly.

He furrows his brow a bit. “Everything just seems to come so easily for you. You barely have to work for anything, and you just said yourself that it’s better to do the things that make you happy. You know not everyone is able to do that, right? How is it all so easy for you?”

I clench my jaw as I take a deep breath. “It’s not easy. I *work* for everything I want. I *work* for everything that makes me happy. My job is not *easy*, my life is not just fucking *easy.*”

His eyebrows raise slightly. “Where’d that come from?”

“One question only.” I grab my beer from the coffee table and drain it before taking my turn.

But Ty then immediately captures one of my pawns.

Fuck.

“Where’d that come from?” he asks again.

I sigh and rub a hand over my face. “Fine, whatever. My parents are doctors, highly successful and in very specialized fields. Both of *their* parents were doctors as well. My sister is a doctor and my younger sister is becoming a doctor. And I’m a *Phys. Ed. teacher*.” I get up and head into the kitchen, grabbing two more beers and passing him one when I come back. “My parents like to give me shit for not reaching my *full potential*. They,

especially my father, look down on everything I do as I am just *having fun*. Like being a Phys. Ed. teacher is just something to do in my spare time, and MMA is a silly little hobby I'll grow out of." I take a drink of my beer and shake my head, all fired up now and letting the flood-gates open. "Everything I did growing up was to please *them*. I went to a private school and achieved top marks. I gave my all in every extra-curricular they put me in, even if I hated it. And do you think I ever got praise for any of it?" I snort out a laugh and shake my head, staring out the window. "Nothing was for me, until I found kickboxing. And by the time I was able to get out from under them and make my own decisions, I decided that everything I do will have one simple rule attached to it. It has to make *me* happy."

I'm suddenly very aware that I just rambled, a lot, with a whole lot of feels. And Ty has been quiet. Just listening and watching me.

I swallow and turn back to him, as he gazes at me with that same blank expression that hides whatever he's really thinking.

"So," I shrug, "no. It's not easy. And I'm able to do things that make me happy because I choose to, and I work for it."

I reach out to take my turn, moving my rook in perfect position to take his knight if he doesn't notice.

Ty doesn't say anything, as he, of course, moves his knight.

Fuck.

But eventually I snag it. And since I got into all of my shit, it's time he does too.

"So, you say you have yourself," I say a bit cautiously. "Where's your family?"

He scans the board, looking for his next move. "Brother is in prison, and no idea where my parents are," he says with surprising ease.

"Uh… ok," I say slowly. "Maybe a bit more of an expansion on that answer is warranted?"

"One question," he says, still looking down at the board.

"That *is* one question."

"No, it isn't."

I blow out a breath of frustration. "Fuck, you're insufferable."

He makes his move. "Go."

As we continue to make a few more moves each, questions are swirling around in my head about him. And I know now that I need to ask them just

right, so he actually gives me an answer instead of a three fucking word grunt.

And as I capture another of his pawns, I know what I want to ask.

“Why do you feel like you need to be in control all the time?”

He sighs as he leans back against the couch. Then he looks down at his hands, as he seems to be thinking about how to answer.

I decide to push it a little further. “I showed you mine. You show me yours.”

He turns his head to look at me, and I’m surprised that it’s not the usual, harsh, *fuck you* stare.

“Because I need control so I don’t fuck up again.”

I roll my eyes. “Oh, come on, that’s not a fucking answer. And fuck up what? Another takedown? Seriously?”

“No,” he bites out. “My life, asshole.”

I cock an eyebrow at him. “Do tell.”

He rubs a hand over his face and reaches for his beer to take a long drink.

The fucking anticipation.

“My brother raised me because my mom fucked off,” he says as he places his beer back on the coffee table. “He is quite a bit older than me, so luckily he was able to take me in to prevent me from going to foster care. Except he’s also a fuck up and used and sold drugs. So, I did too. He was stupid and got caught, so when he went to prison, I… went hard.”

As I watch him and think about the Ty I know, I can’t picture this. This Ty before me, the ever in control asshole, doing drugs and being wild? No fucking way.

“I got into some trouble, and it looked like I was quickly headed in the same direction as my brother, so it was a wake-up call. I had been in MMA for a few years at this point, and it was the only thing that brought me any clarity and purpose. And I was good at it. So, I threw myself into it, and my work. If I stay focused on my goal and follow my plan, I won’t have time to fall into the same trap again.”

We’re both silent as I take a moment to process this, and Ty looks uncomfortable as fuck.

“Damn,” I say. “That’s a lot.”

He huffs out a breath and reaches for his beer again.

“I have a lot more follow up questions,” I say as I watch his throat bob while he takes a drink.

“I’m sure you do,” he mutters.

He then captures my rook.

Fucker.

“What does your moon tattoo mean?” he asks, glancing down to my ribs.

That takes me by surprise. I was expecting a question about everything I word vomited earlier about my family. “You already asked me before, and I told you, it’s just for fun.”

Ty just stares back at me, clearly seeing through that.

My eyes narrow at him. “Of all the tattoos I have, why are you stuck on this one?”

He shakes his head. “Not my turn to answer questions.”

“Have I told you lately that I hate you?” I smile at him.

“Answer.”

I sigh. “Somehow, you’ve managed to pick out one of the very few tattoos I have that actually does mean something.” I pause, as a warm feeling spreads through my chest. It’s my favorite tattoo… and it seems like it’s his too. “Ever since I was a kid, I really liked the moon. There’s something about it that always brought me comfort. Every night, it looks different. It cycles between dark and light, and the fact that a new moon is born out of darkness is just… I don’t know, there’s something really cool about that. I guess in some sort of weird way, I compared it to my own transition in life, when branching out on my own and making my own decisions. That I can make something light out of the darkness.” I glance towards him. “But I think if you look up the actual meaning of a full moon tattoo, it’s like a werewolf or something. So, that’s cool too I guess.” I shrug, a bit surprised at how uncomfortable I am sharing this part of me.

Ty observes me silently for a moment before dropping his eyes to the board with a nod.

Of course he wouldn’t have any response to that. Even though I’m not sure I really want him to.

My next move is an epic one, as I take *his* rook.

And an epic move deserves an epic question.

Because enough of this. It’s time to get down to business.

I lean back and wait until he makes eye contact with me.

“Do you know how to suck dick, Tiger? Or do you need me to show you again?”

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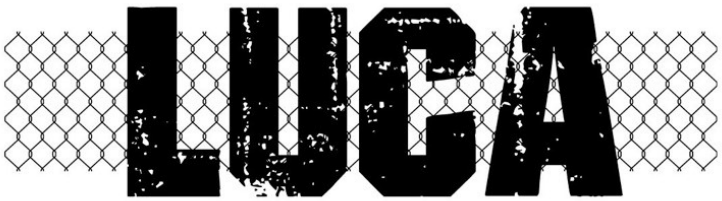
TWENTY-ONE



I DON'T KNOW who moves first, as the chessboard falls to the ground and our lips crash together. There's absolutely nothing calculated about either of our actions as our hands roam and we stay locked in a heated, messy kiss. All the tension that was building during the game, as we reluctantly shared pieces of ourselves with each other, has now overflowed. And as he pulls at my hair and I bite his lip, I think it's more than just the tension from tonight we are releasing.

My hand drops to his belt buckle, and he inhales sharply. But his tongue continues to slide along mine and his hand runs over my chest, which is all I need to know we are *doing* this.

Fuck yeah.

I slide his zipper down and shove my hand into his pants, grasping his hardening cock. And as a small grunt escapes him, I'm instantly hard too. And very happy.

As I stroke him in his pants, his hand once again travels up to the back of my head, gripping my hair tight as he deepens our kiss. I can feel the release as he lets go of everything that controls him, just like the last time we did this. He's letting himself enjoy this, and well, we're going to fucking enjoy this.

I pull back from him and take in the look in his eyes. There are no walls erected, except for the one in my hand.

"So, you didn't answer my question." I keep my eyes glued to his, and my hand on his cock.

His chest rises and falls as he stares back at me. His brow then furrows slightly. "Obviously I've never sucked a dick before."

“That’s actually not obvious.” I shake my head. “You could have. How would I know?”

He narrows his eyes at me to tell me I’m playing a dangerous game, so I just chuckle.

“Ok,” I say with a nod. “Study up.”

I slide off the couch to my knees before him, nudging his legs apart. As I reach up to pull his pants down, I sense a tentativeness. But the heat in his eyes tells me to ignore it.

And as I take the tip of his cock into my mouth, his hesitation immediately evaporates. He moans softly as I slowly take him in and out of my mouth, increasing my pace on him. The last time I did this, it was frantic and rushed. This time, I want to *taste* this cock and fucking savor it.

I hear a breath escape him, followed by another small groan. And as his fingers wind through my hair again, I can’t help but moan with him, and raise my eyes.

I release him from my mouth, bringing my hand up to stroke him. “Watching, Tiger?”

His grip in my hair tightens, pulling a smile from me. My eyes stay glued to him as I drop my head again, and lick slowly from his balls to his tip.

He swallows and squirms slightly, so I do it again.

“You like that?” I ask, then lick a delicious bead of precum from his tip. “Hm. Soft and slow, or fast and hard?”

He pulls his bottom lip between his teeth and groans again as I run my hand up and down his dick.

“Tell me.”

He grips my hair even tighter, causing me to wince.

“Hard.”

“Knew it.” I knock his hand away from my head and take him back into my mouth. A tension enters his muscles as I work him, but this time it’s from pleasure. I hear his breathing increase, and the groan that comes out of him as I take him to the back of my throat almost has me coming in my pants.

Knowing I am having this effect on him, to help free him from the confines of his absurd fucking thinking, urges me on to bring him more and more pleasure. Each moan, groan and pant that leaves him is fuel for me to take more. And before long, I’m desperate.

I look up at him, and his eyes meet mine. His features are completely free of all the tension and hardness he carries with him everywhere, as he once again loses himself to me. And fuck… that feels good.

I reach down to undo my pants, sliding a hand in to grip myself and stroke, as I continue to suck him.

His eyes follow my hand, and he suddenly pushes me back and off him.

I stay kneeling before him and push my pants down, moving my hand up and down my rock hard cock as he watches. He bites his lip, breathing heavy.

"I like it hard and fast too," I say, stroking faster.

He takes a deep breath in and sits up, bringing himself closer to me.

"You need me to walk you through it?" I ask in a low, taunting voice.

He reaches out and lifts my shirt up, not saying anything. I take it off, throwing it aside before dropping my hand to my dick again.

But he bats it away and wraps his around it instead.

Be still my beating heart.

He watches his hand as he slowly pumps my cock, before he forcefully pulls me towards him, and then pushes me onto my back on the couch.

All I can do is watch him, as he reaches out and tugs at my pants. And yes, please, I need to be very naked right now, and I want him to be naked too. So I kick my pants off and pull at his shirt, which he whips off in an impressive one armed move.

His stare is unsettling, in the best way, as he rakes his eyes over my body and settles between my legs. I groan as he once again wraps his hand around my cock and strokes me. Slowly.

I writhe under his touch and prop myself up on my elbow. "Do you need another lesson on how to handle a cock?"

His eyes fly up to meet mine, just as he lowers his mouth dangerously close to my dick. "Shut up, Mitchell."

"Then get sucking, Roscoe."

And just as I hoped my words would, they light that competitive fire in him and his eyes drop once again to my dick, along with his mouth.

The feeling of his mouth on the tip of my cock sends an immediate zing of electricity up my spine and I grip his arm tight as I watch him take me in.

He may have never done this before, but *of course,* he's good at it. And this time, I have absolutely no problem with that. This time, I'm rooting for him, as I am hardcore reaping those benefits.

"Deeper," I say, moving my hand to the back of his head.

His dark eyes look up at me, and *goddamn*. Now that's a sexy fucking sight. And even better, with my dick in his mouth, he can't snap back at me.

And *even better*… he obliges.

"Oh, fuck," I moan, watching him bob on my cock. One of his hands is resting on my thigh and his other is over my hip, dangerously close to where I want it.

I reach down and nudge his hand. He looks up at me again and I smirk at him.

"Hand too," I say.

He releases me from his mouth, and I whimper.

But again, he doesn't say anything as he wraps his hand around my cock, which is wet from his saliva, and he pumps me while he watches. Still, too slow for my liking.

"Ty-*ler*, you're fucking killing me, I said hand *too*," I groan. "And, fast and hard. This is not-"

His free hand flies up to my throat as his eyes flash. "Shut. Up. Mitchell."

I smile at him. "Then show me you can actually do this."

The fire in his eyes burns bright as he pushes me into the couch then releases my throat. He adjusts himself between my legs again, and immediately takes me in his mouth. Hard. Fast. And *perfect.*

"*Fuck*…" I drop my head back, but immediately lift it again. Ty Roscoe is sucking my dick, and I can't miss a second of this show.

His hand is wrapped around the base of my cock, stroking me in perfect time with his licks and sucks. My eyes roam over the muscles of his shoulders and back, and my fingers slide into his messy dark hair. With each bob of his head, I'm getting closer and closer, as the pressure and tingles flow through my body.

I wait as long as I can, but eventually I pull him up. As he releases me from his mouth, his eyes meet mine for a brief moment, before I wrap a hand around the back of his head and press my lips to his. He opens for me immediately, letting my tongue sweep into his mouth as I taste myself on him.

His body gives into me, as his hips lower, and my hand moves between us. A wave of pleasure crashes over me as I wrap my hand around both of our cocks, and jerk us off.

The soft groan that comes out of him is fucking *delicious* as I swallow it down, urging me to pump us faster. He drops his forehead to my shoulder, his muscles tensing.

"You going to come with me, Tiger?" I pant.

He nods against my shoulder with another groan. "Fuck…"

And as we both near the edge, I turn my head towards him, capturing his mouth with mine again as we fall over. Our breaths are heavy as we kiss with growing intensity, devouring each other while we lose all connection to the world around us. The waves crash hard, and I find myself holding him against me tightly while we come.

His lips stay pressed to mine as he leans over me, breathing heavily into each other as we come down from a pretty fucking intense and awesome high.

As I release a large breath, I pull my head back and look down at the impressive amount of cum covering my abs.

"Hmm," I hum, as I slowly trail my fingers through it, his eyes following every inch of the way.

And when I bring them up to my mouth and lick every last drop, I see the want in his eyes as he watches my lips and tongue. He doesn't even hesitate as I pull him towards me, parting his lips and letting me push my tongue past them, giving him a taste of us. I watch him as he licks his lips and swallows, and fuck, I'm getting hard again.

"Cinnamon roll?" I ask quietly.

His brow furrows. "What?"

"Yeah, no," I draw my brows together as well with a slight shake of my head. "Maybe next time, can't get too greedy."

He's quiet for a moment as he glances towards the coffee table where the actual cinnamon rolls are sitting, then back to me. "…What?"

"Nothing."

We've yet to move, as we lay naked on the couch, cocks still touching, and we both suddenly realize this. He pushes himself up into sitting, and I do the same.

"So…" I nod into the living room. "It's late and you've been drinking…"

He nods as he watches me wipe up the mess on my stomach with my t-shirt.

“Movie?” I ask, turning to look at him.

A look of surprise briefly flashes across his face before he catches himself, giving me a slight shrug.

And honestly, yeah, I’m not sure how I feel about this either. The dick sucking is great, but… now what?

“A children’s movie?” he asks, eyeing the TV.

A slight surge of annoyance rushes in, which brings me comfort. Ah yes. He’s still an ass, not much else has changed. I can work with this.

“Well, that depends,” I say, reaching out to grab the remote and turn the TV on. “Do you think Ratatouille is a children’s movie?”

“I don’t know what that is.” He reaches down to the floor to grab his t-shirt.

The gasp that comes out of me startles him. But then I remember who I’m talking to. “Oh. I should have known.” I scroll to find the best movie ever made about the adorable little rat chef. “This is exciting, hold onto your dick, Ty.” I look down at it as he pulls his underwear back up. “Or not. Anyway, go get us more beers.” I wave a hand towards the kitchen. “You’re in for a wild ride.”

He doesn’t move from the couch as he stares at me.

And I just stare back at him.

Eventually, he sighs and gets up, grabbing two more beers from the fridge. As he passes me one and sits down on the couch beside me, he mumbles, “I’m only doing this because I can’t drive home right now.”

I just nod and turn the movie on.

Sure. Because cabs aren’t a thing.

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TWENTY-TWO

THE KINK in my neck makes me wince as I wake, slumped over on Luca's couch. It's still dark outside, so I glance at my watch to see it's just after 5:00 am. Considering it was probably 2:00 am by the time we fell asleep, after a few more beers at that, I am feeling rough.

Luca is asleep beside me, curled up against the arm of the couch, hugging a pillow to his chest. My eyes travel over his face as he sleeps peacefully, and then down to the floor where the chessboard and pieces are still scattered.

But my gaze lands on Luca once again, as I listen to his deep breaths while he sleeps. His loose curls are a mess, partially hanging over his forehead and sticking straight up in various directions. I can't pull my gaze away from him as I take the chance to finally study him, knowing he won't catch me doing so.

And as I do, my eyes roaming over his relaxed features and down his muscular tattooed arms, that unsettling feeling takes over once again. And I realize, for the first time, that it's not uncomfortable. It's just different.

Last night, I told him things I've never told anyone, and did something I've never done with anyone. I could have left… but I didn't. I've never stayed over after hooking up with girls, and I've always told myself that I can't have that sort of connection. But something about him has that wall crumbling down and allowing him in.

Allowing me to enjoy myself.

Even when he puts on a cartoon movie about a rat that cooks.

I rub a hand over my face and stand up quietly, trying not to jostle and wake Luca. As I glance back down at him, I think briefly about waking him,

but I don’t. Instead, I grab my hoodie, slip it on, and quietly leave his apartment.

As I head outside into the cool November air and towards my car, those same thoughts and feelings continue to swirl around within me.

Do I really have a thing for Luca Mitchell?

“Hey, Ty!”

I look up as I enter the gym to see Max smiling at me.

“Hey,” I greet him, glancing around, seeing only Noah and Rosa here in the boxing ring.

“So, watch the fights last night?” Max asks, as he hangs a jump rope on its hook on the wall.

I nod. “I did. Blaese was a beast.”

“Oh, fuck.” Max chuckles. “Was he ever. Pretty heavy left hook on that guy.” He shakes his head slightly. “I would know.”

I chuckle as well, having almost forgot that Max fought him a few times when they were both rising up the ranks. “Props to you for putting yourself on the receiving end of that.”

“Oh, no.” He seriously shakes his head. “He was never able to get a left hook on me.” He then winks, pulling a light laugh from me.

Max smiles, observing me for a moment. He then pats my shoulder as he turns towards his office. “Keep up the good work, bud.”

“Thanks,” I mutter as I watch him leave.

Rosa and Noah give me a wave from the boxing ring as I head into the locker room, and I’m thankful that no one else is here yet so I can enjoy some quiet as I get ready.

But as I’m running the track, my eyes are whipping towards the door every time it opens. And a sneaky, hopeful feeling creeps in each time it does.

I hate that.

Just when I think he’s not even going to come in today, the door opens and Luca walks in. Everyone else is already here, and he just casually

strolls in with a huge smile. And I can't help but watch him. He's wearing a bright tie-dye hoodie and gray sweats, coffee in hand and his hair is pulled back with a bright blue headband.

He greets everyone with a high five or a wave and a smile, his presence immediately taking over the entire gym. And as I continue to quietly run the track, trying my best to ignore him… I can't. With every laugh and greeting, my attention is pulled back to him.

Eventually, he turns to me as I run by, and his eyes easily travel down my body. He takes a drink of his coffee, giving me a slight nod.

I quickly bring my focus back to the track before me. About ten more laps to this run is needed…

As he heads into the locker room, I'm thankful that our interaction ended at that. I still don't know what this means for either of us. He pisses me off more than anything or anyone, and yet somehow, he's the one that can make me feel and forget.

He takes my control away from me… and I let him.

Also, knowing Luca and his loud mouth, I'm just waiting for him to announce to the entire gym that I sucked his dick. The last thing I want is interference in whatever the fuck this is as I try to figure out my feelings around it.

But… whatever this is… it does feel good.

My thoughts travel back to last night as I keep running, remembering the feeling of his hand wrapped around both of us, as-

Suddenly, a colorful figure stands before me and I stop, holding my hands out to keep from running into Luca. While he simply stands in the middle of the track.

He smiles widely. "Wow. So in your head you didn't even see me here." He tilts his head as he looks me up and down. "Hm. What were you thinking about, Ty?"

All my earlier thoughts immediately fly from my mind as I take in his irritating smirk.

"Nothing." I move to step around him so I can keep running, but he side steps in front of me, blocking my way.

"Oh," he places a hand over his heart, "now that hurts my feelings."

"What do you want?" I ask, glancing around the gym. But thankfully no one is watching.

"To roll." Luca shrugs.

I bring my eyes back to him and he smiles again. That cocky smile he saves just for me. The one that pushes every single one of my fucking buttons. My muscles tense as I stand before him, while he observes me.

"Yeah, you know," he raises his chin towards me, "that tournament we're both in next weekend? We should really be training for it."

I stare back at him, wondering how he found out that I had also entered.

"Hm," he nods, "yeah, I know you're in it too. Thought you'd hide that from me? Nice move." He crosses his arms and shrugs one shoulder. "Hey, maybe we'll get to compete against each other again, for old times' sake."

I take a deep breath in and release it. "I need to get my head back in it."

Luca nods seriously. "You need to get your head in something."

A slight rush of exhilaration rises as he drops his eyes to my dick.

"But, for this head," he looks up and pats my hair as I jerk away from him, "let's get training then." He nods curtly to me and turns to face the mats. "Train me up so I can kick your ass next weekend."

I scoff. "You wish."

"Hm," he turns his head towards me, "nah. I wish for a lot of things, Ty, but that isn't one of them. Because it's happening."

He walks to the mats, and I continue standing on the track, watching him. He's still wearing the headband to keep his curls back, and his black shorts are covered in bright colored graffiti. He takes off his purple t-shirt to expose his mess of tattoos, and my eyes immediately drop to the moon on his ribs.

As I take in his wildness, I think about what he shared with me last night. In his own way, he is also seeking control. The Luca Mitchell I know is starting to make more sense. The lack of care about *anything* still drives me fucking crazy, but I can appreciate that he is doing what he needs to break free from what has held him back for so long.

I know that feeling all too well.

But the difference between us in how we obtain that control is obvious, as he laughs and jokes with Seb and Elijah, happiness radiating off of him.

Maybe I really can learn something from him.

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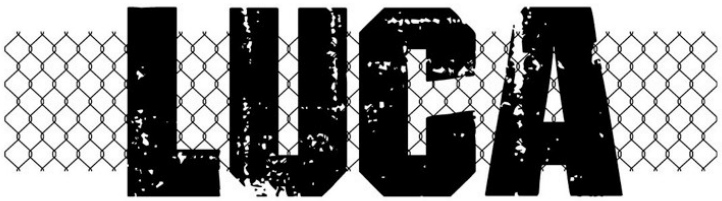
TWENTY-THREE



I PULL into the parking lot and kill the engine, leaning back in my seat to stare out at the gym. The grappling tournament is in three days, and I'm feeling pretty good about it. There are a few things I still feel like I need to tighten up, but overall, I'm happy with the progress I've made in my training.

But I'm not feeling so good about the cold shoulder my training partner has been giving me the last couple days. Every time I see Ty, it's during peak training time in the gym so he's laser focused, in full training mode. So, ok, not necessarily the *cold shoulder* but my tender little heart feels shunned since there's been no time for fun. I miss the weekend. The weekend is when fun things happen, like dick sucking.

But it's not the weekend, it's Wednesday. We have just days left to work on all the things I want to work on so I can kick some grappling ass.

And if there just happens to be some extra time for fun… well… bonus.

I get out of my Jeep and it's like my thoughts have summoned him, as he pulls into the parking spot across from me. As I watch Ty get out of his car, I take a moment to be honest with myself.

I want to explore whatever this is with him. He's fucking hot, he can apparently suck dick really well, and he has a great dick himself. What more could I want? I mean, sure, maybe for him not to hate me, but baby steps… baby steps…

He sends a glare my way as I stand by my Jeep, watching him retrieve his bag from his back seat. And why that glare makes me feel things, I'll never know.

But I feel even more things as I take in his grease-stained pants and hands. He obviously came straight from work, and my god. Grease-stained Ty just does something for me.

“Hey, Tiger,” I say as he closes his car door and starts walking towards the gym.

He glances my way again, and I give him my Ty-smile. I know I need to initiate whatever steps we make in whatever this is, and I’m fine with that. I’m a good step taker.

“What’s with the Tiger thing?” he asks, lowering his gaze again and continuing to walk towards the gym.

I shrug as I fall into step beside him. “You like it.”

“I never said I like it.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“Well, I don’t.”

“Bullshit. You never told me to stop.” I turn to look at him. “You want me to stop?”

He narrows his eyes at me, adjusts his bag on his shoulder, and increases his pace towards the gym door.

Oh. He *does* like it.

I run a couple steps to catch up with him. “We rolling tonight?”

“We can,” Ty mutters.

“Hm, *we can*,” I mock him, then put my arm out in front of his chest to make him stop.

He sighs and turns to look at me.

“Look,” I sigh as well. “This *hurts* to say, again, and I hate this more than anything, but you have something I need. I need to roll with you tonight so I can be ready for this weekend.” I grimace as I grit out, “Please?”

Ty just looks back at me for a moment before he nods curtly. “Sure.”

My mouth drops open in shock. “Sure? *Sure*? Not *fine?* Oh my god. The growth.”

Ty just rolls his eyes and yanks the door open to the gym, letting it smack me right in the face.

Asshole.

“Hey, Ty,” I hear Adão greet him. As I enter behind Ty, Adão’s eyes slide to me with confusion entering his gaze. “And Luca…”

“Hey.” I smile at him and nudge Ty. “The proper greeting here is a *hey, hi, hello-*”

“Fuck off,” Ty says to me, and he side steps away from my nudge.

I shrug. “That could work too, I guess, but I don’t think Adão here would appreciate that so much.”

Adão laughs, but again shoots an awkward glance between Ty and I. Ty looks impressively uncomfortable and glances towards the locker rooms, like he wishes he could just high tail it out of here. Especially since other eyes from around the gym are landing on us.

I push past him, walking towards the locker room and waving at everyone, being the chivalrous gentleman I am as I take the attention off of the scandal of us *arriving together.*

Oh, if they only knew.

And I can’t help the little thrill I get knowing he is following *me* now.

The locker room is empty, and we silently go to our lockers to get ready. As I drop my sweatpants, standing before him in just my underwear while I pull my shorts on, I notice his eyes quickly fall to my ass before he looks away. And I do the same to him.

I bite my tongue, staying quiet and allowing us this space to just be, and look. But as he closes his locker door and turns to head into the gym, I dart before him, placing a hand on his chest to stop him.

He gives me that usual blank faced stare, like he’s already bothered by what I’m about to say before I even say it.

I hesitate briefly, not entirely sure why I even stopped him, before slapping a smile on. “Did you know that a tiger’s urine smells like buttered popcorn?”

His face twists in horror. “What?”

I shrug, unsure myself why I chose to share that right now. And why I even know that. “You’re a tiger, thought you’d like to know.”

“Uh… ok.” Ty shoves my hand off his chest, shooting me a weird look. “Let’s just go.”

“Mm-hm, yup.” I nod, following him out of the locker room.

As we head towards the mats, Max is standing there waiting for us.

“Rolling?” he asks.

“Yup,” I say as I stop before him.

“Excellent.” Max smiles. “I like what I’ve been seeing with you guys in your last few sessions.” He glances between us as we stand before him.

“Today, let’s work on holding and attacking in side control. Ty, top, Luca bottom, then switch.”

My heart damn near fucking stops at the thought of Ty topping me in another context… and then switching… but *no. Stop it, Luca. You’re a professional*.

But professionals need to have fun too…

“Got it.” I nod to Max, and smile at Ty. “Top me, Tiger.”

Ty huffs and subtly rolls his eyes, dropping onto the mat. Max glances curiously between us, before backing up to allow us to get started.

And we’ve barely even fucking started when Ty has me blocked.

The fucker has his knees deep into my left side and my right arm locked in his. I curse to myself, because if I was on top I would have been working to control his head… but he has his arms over my arm instead of my head, giving him more mobility and severely limiting my movement.

Fuck him and his top skills. At least here, anyway.

I can’t move side to side as he has me locked, and his weight is on my right arm to keep me from rolling.

Obviously, he is going to move into mount and attempt for submission. But even if I do manage to escape this, I will have to roll, meaning he will then be in a position to attack me from the back.

But as his knee comes over my hips, it’s too late to even figure that out as he manages to mount me in the way I *don’t* want.

As his hand comes down to hold my right wrist, and the threat of submission looms, I try to keep my attention on the fight and not on *him.* Not on the feeling of his hands on me, and his hips over mine…

He leans over, and I immediately lift my free hand in front of my neck, knowing he’s going for a choke as he snakes his arm behind my neck. I can feel the frustration ooze out of him, as he clearly wasn’t expecting me to read him like that. And as I protect my neck from his attack, he now has to reformulate, recalculate, replan, whatever the fuck his brain does, as he isn’t able to get his other arm in front of my neck for a choke.

And recalculate he does. With my right arm in his grip at my side and the other at my neck, his hips are free to move up into a high mounted position over my chest.

Bright side… his dick is in my face…

Except not so bright, because he already has one arm pinned and the other is right at my mid-line, keeping me from doing anything with it in the

position we're in. He's controlling that elbow without even doing anything and the anger rises up inside me, quickly.

Before I know it, he has that arm out and pinned to the mat, with his legs around my neck and I'm submitting to him in a mounted triangle.

Dick still in my face.

I shove him off me as he loosens his grip, and I push myself back on the mat.

Not at *all* how I want to be mounted by him.

"Luca."

I look up at Max, as he crosses his arms.

"I know." I stand up, shaking my head. "I know. I let him get into a high mount when I could have taken the chance at him attacking my back, where I could have passed it."

Max nods. "Could have been the lower risk position. But you did the right thing by protecting your neck against a choke attempt. I'm not sure why you let him have that arm when he moved into high mount though."

"Yeah, I don't either," I mutter. I look up to Ty as he once again simply stands there, observing me. His expression giving nothing away, as usual.

I sigh as I stare back at him. Even though I lost this little tumble… I kind of want to see him celebrate it. Even just a smug look in my direction. Which I would then wipe off, of course. But, as I think about his reasons for not celebrating these little wins, a small ripple of hurt for him flows through me.

"Ok, again with Luca on bottom." Max gestures for us to return to the mat. "Luca, think about creating space in side control. Ty will be more concerned about holding, you want the space to limit his ability to attack."

"Way to give him my angle," I mutter, shooting Max a cheeky look.

Max laughs. "He knows."

I shift my gaze to Ty, and he cocks an eyebrow, in an almost playful gesture.

Wow. Impressive.

"Ok." I blow out a breath and drop to the mat, laying on my back. "Never been one to push a top away, but given the circumstances…" I wink at Ty, and he scoffs, getting into position over top of me.

Max furrows his brow, looking between us in confusion once again.

And fair enough. I also think it's weird he's not trying to kill me for that.

I manage to get out of Ty's control a few times as we drill, and when we switch, Ty is, of course, an excellent bottom. Which gets me all fired up for different reasons. But I do get him under my control a few times, making me feel more confident in the areas I need heading into the tournament this weekend.

"Alright, good work." Max nods at us as we stand from the mat. "That's it for today."

"Already?" I check the clock on the wall, and it's only 6:30. Everyone else is still deep into their workout.

"Yup, get out of here. No more work today, you're looking good." Max smiles. "Take some time to chill, you've earned it."

I love the sound of that, but Ty immediately looks uncomfortable. He glances around the gym, like he's looking for something he can do.

"Ty," Max says gently, bringing his attention to him. "Take a night off."

Ty swallows and gives him a tight nod.

"Good." Max smiles then looks over our shoulders to the boxing ring. He gestures with his head towards the locker room and starts towards the ring. "Get out of here, enjoy your night."

He heads off, leaving Ty and I alone on the mats.

"A night off, with nothing to do…" I say slowly with a smirk.

He once again glances around the gym and opens his mouth to say something, but I beat him to it. Because his excuses just aren't going to fly here.

"Movie?"

He quickly brings his eyes back to me. "Another cartoon?"

I roll my eyes. "Listen, it's not a cartoon, it's *animated.* And please, don't pretend like you didn't enjoy Remy and his culinary genius."

He draws his brows together and shakes his head. "I did not."

"Bullshit."

He huffs a breath and gives his head another shake, turning to head into the locker room. I follow him and am very happy to see the locker room empty as everyone else is still training.

"Alright," I lean against the locker beside him as he opens his, "well, since you don't like movies, we'll just have to find something else to occupy our time."

He continues to quietly pull his clothes out of his bag, ignoring me.

"Wanna fuck?"

He turns to me with wide eyes, and I laugh.

“Yeah. Come on.” I push off the locker and head to mine. “This time, you can top me and I won’t fight back.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

I'M TRYING NOT to ask myself or Luca any questions as I follow him into his apartment. I don't think either of us quite believe we are doing this, and trying my best to stay out of my head in this moment seems like the best thing I can do.

As I close his apartment door behind us, he heads right for a large speaker, flipping it on and pulling his phone from his back pocket. I watch the movement, my eyes staying on his ass for a moment longer than is necessary.

But I'm pulled from that moment when an upbeat pop song blares through the speakers.

"What the fuck is that?" I ask, the bass thumping and a female voice crooning throughout the space.

Luca whips around to face me with an expression almost like betrayal. "Excuse me?"

I gesture towards his phone in his hands. "The weird pop music. Why are you listening to that?"

His face falls in absolute horror. "Don't you ever, *ever*, diss our queen."

"What?" I stare back at him in confusion as he looks like I kicked his puppy.

He dramatically points to the speaker beside him. "Taylor Swift is arguably the best thing to ever grace your ears."

I make a face, and he scoffs. "Oh, and what music do you listen to?"

I start to shrug, and he holds a hand up to stop me. "Let me guess, you don't listen to music."

"I do sometimes," I say, finishing my shrug.

“Hm.” Luca shakes his head. “Sometimes. Fun.” He then crosses his arms and observes me carefully. “I know exactly what era you are.”

“Era?” I ask, once again confused. Or still, I don’t even know.

“Yeah. I,” he touches his hand to his chest, “am *Lover* with a bit of *Folklore* sprinkled in. You are *Reputation*,” he then waves his hand in a circle before me, “with *1989* rising.”

“I have no idea what any of that means.” The confusion is growing, and he looks even more hurt now.

“You will.” He nods seriously.

I shake my head. “I don’t think so.”

He nods again. “You will.”

“You’re really fucking annoying.” I sigh as I cross my arms.

He smiles and crosses his arms as well. “Then why are you here?”

We stare silently at each other, until he lowers his hands to the hem of his shirt. He takes it off, keeping his eyes on me, then tosses it aside and walks into the bedroom.

I continue to stand in the middle of his living room as he disappears.

“Coming?” he calls.

My heart is racing as I enter his bedroom, which is just as bright and obnoxious as he is. My eyes land on his bed with a purple comforter, and I get a thrill when I think about the photo he sent me when he was laying in bed, texting me. Thinking of that photo now, and those first texts to each other, it makes me wonder how early on in this hatred game these feelings of curiosity and understanding have been hiding.

Luca stands by his bed, watching me as he pulls his headband off, which was pink today, and tosses it on the nightstand. My eyes follow his movements, but I stay silent, standing in the doorway.

He looks me up and down. “You going to stay clothed for this endeavor? Might need to at least lower your zipper.”

My hand fidgets at my side, but I don’t hide it fast enough as his eyes drop.

He walks towards me, keeping his eyes on mine and stopping just inches away from me. I swallow as I take him in, my gaze dropping to his lips. He says nothing, for a change. Instead, he steps closer, closing the small gap between us and pressing his lips to mine in a surprisingly soft kiss.

My entire body and brain is frozen for a moment, as I take the time to appreciate his touch once again unlocking the doors I hide behind. One click, as his tongue nudges my lips apart, another as our kiss deepens and yet another when my hands lift to touch his tattooed skin.

He then pulls back with a sparkle in his eye, yanking my shirt over my head. As he pulls at the waistband of my pants, he shoots me a suggestive look.

That look is enough to unlock the final lock, and I'm pushing him onto the bed while we frantically kick our pants off. We're completely naked, hard and locked in another kiss. Our moans fill the room as we roll around on his bed while he grinds his cock against mine. And when he lowers his hand to squeeze a bead of precum from the tip of his cock, I lick it off his thumb without hesitation.

I want more.

The look of anticipation in his eyes as I shove him onto his back and roll over him has me realizing just how much I wanted this again, with him. And I'm ready to take it.

Luca moans as I wrap my hand around his dick and stroke, and I drop my lips to his. His tongue easily slides against mine as his fingers rake through my hair, and his stubble scratches against my chin. The feeling of his hard muscles flexing under my touch is intoxicating, in a way I've never felt before. My lips travel down his neck, pulling even more moans from him that urge me on.

As I take his cock into my mouth, and taste his precum on my tongue, I am completely lost to all the sensations flowing through me. The taste of him, the feel of him, the sounds of his groans… it's all consuming as I suck him and stroke him, relishing in the feeling of riling him up like this and having him at my mercy.

I look up to take in the sight of him and am met with hazel eyes staring back at me.

He smirks and props himself up on an elbow. "If you want to fuck me, you have to get me ready."

Electricity shoots through me as I release him from my mouth and push back on my knees.

Luca gestures with his chin to the nightstand. "Top drawer."

I open it to find lube and condoms. As I pull them out and turn back to Luca, he's stroking himself as he watches me.

“Ever fucked an ass before?”

I pop open the lube with one hand and knock his knee aside with the other so I can settle between his legs again. “Yes.”

“Oh, exciting.” Luca smiles as he continues to lazily stroke his cock. “So, I don’t need to walk you through this one?”

I grab his wrist, pulling his hand from his dick and pinning it to the bed. His smile morphs into one of quiet, dangerous joy.

“I thought you wanted to be topped without a fight?” I ask him in a low voice.

An intense heat enters his eyes. “Then don’t fight me, Tiger. Fuck me.”

My hand stays on his wrist, pinning it to the bed, as I lower my lubed fingers to his ass. He raises his knee and a moan catches in his chest as I press my fingers to his hole.

“Fuck,” he breathes out as he keeps his eyes locked on mine. He’s trying not to squirm underneath my touch, and as I watch him restrain himself, I give him a dark smirk.

His gaze immediately falls to my lips, and his chest rises with a heavy breath in.

“It’s hard, trying not to fight me, isn’t it?” I ask.

His eyes fly back up to mine. He exhales forcefully as I push a finger inside him. But he doesn’t look away from me.

“You want control here, don’t you?” I ask as I move my finger in and out of him.

He squirms slightly, but I tighten my grip on him and thrust my finger in him hard, causing him to grunt and bite his lip.

“Answer me.”

“I do.” His eyes narrow as his chin drops. A dangerous look for someone in his position.

I huff out a breath of amusement. “Well, too bad.”

I push another finger into his ass and his eyes close with a groan of pleasure. A bead of precum leaks from the tip of his cock, and I barely even register what I’m doing before my tongue is lapping it up.

Luca is attempting to writhe underneath me as I hold him still and move my fingers in and out of him. I can feel the daggers being shot my way before I even look up at him again.

“Alright.” He jerks his wrist out of my grasp, and I chuckle darkly. “Just fuck me already.”

His hand lands on my chest and he starts to push me back, but I grab hold of his wrist again and hold it, not moving from my spot. We stay there, staring at each other and waiting for the other to crack in a battle for dominance that hasn't even fully begun yet.

His jaw ticks, as he yanks his wrist away and lowers it to my cock instead. He strokes me, keeping his eyes glued to mine.

His usual smirk finds its way back onto his lips and he finally breaks the silence. "I'll give you this one... for now."

He rips open a condom and slides it onto me. I watch with a racing heart as he lubes up my cock, then lays on his back again to run his lube covered fingers over his ass.

My heart is now thumping heavily in my chest at the thought of doing this. Of fucking a guy… fucking *him.* But my body is moving on its own, craving this, hungry for it, demanding it.

Our groans fill the space around us as I push into his tight ass and the pleasure takes over. I'm gripping his leg impossibly tight as I sink into him and when our eyes meet, I pause.

"Fuck," I breathe out, and he nods through heavy breaths.

The warmth and pleasure spreads through me as I pull back and thrust into him. His head is rolled back, and his eyes are closed as he lets me slam into him. And I can't tear my eyes away from the sight before me. He's in a completely vulnerable state, letting me fuck him, control him, take from him. As I fuck him harder, the sound of slapping skin mixing with our moans and groans surrounding us, I fall deeper into the pleasure. I'm letting it control my movements, my desire, and my want.

For him.

Suddenly, he props himself up and pulls away from me.

"What-"

"You can do better than that." He gets onto his hands and knees, shoving his ass back and peering over his shoulder at me. Even though I can only see his eyes, I know he has that annoying smirk in place, goading me.

"Fuck you, Mitchell," I murmur, as I reach out and grab his hips, lining myself up to push into him again.

"That's what I'm trying to get you to do," he says with a slight shrug of his shoulder, still peering back at me.

Fine.

I thrust into him so hard he grunts and loses his balance on his hands, reaching out to hold the headboard.

“Oh, fuck,” he groans as I pound into him, hard. “Now you’ve got it.”

“Shut up,” I grunt.

“Hm, yeah, talk dirty to me.”

I bite my lip to keep from losing it on him.

But he just continues. “Yeah, bring me to pound town, ground and pound me, get down and-”

My hand lands forcefully on the back of his neck, pushing him down into the mattress and leaning over him. “You need to shut the fuck up.”

He smiles against his purple comforter. “Not a fan of dirty talk?”

“That,” I release his neck and thrust my cock into him, “was not dirty talk.”

He grunts as I slam into him again.

“Just take my cock in your ass and keep your mouth shut.”

He smiles back at me, and buries his face in his bed, pushing his ass back against me. “My ass can do the talking then.”

“For fuck’s sake…”

Fucking him hard and fast keeps his mouth preoccupied with pants and grunts, and my hand on his back keeps his face pushed into the mattress so I don’t have to hear whatever he has to say. And so I can keep control of this.

But eventually, I allow him to take some from me. He’s pushing his ass back to grind against me, and the more he does it, the more control I give up. I’m now leaning back, watching as he rides me from his hands and knees, peering at me over his shoulder.

And it feels fucking amazing.

He drops his hand to his dick to stroke himself and pants out, “I’m going to come.”

A low moan escapes me as I run my hand up his back while his muscles all tighten and his head drops. He’s pumping himself as he trembles under my touch, coming in his hand with a guttural groan. The sight, sound and feeling of him coming is bringing me closer to the edge, and I am so fucking close.

Then he’s pulling himself off my dick and turning around to face me with a smile.

“Fuck no, I’m not done,” I shoot at him.

He just lays on his back with a smile, and simply gestures for me to enter him again. “Come on in.”

A breath of frustration escapes me, but I grab him and push into him, needing this more than I need to put him in his place right now.

Immediately, he reaches up to grab the back of my neck, pulling me down. His cum soaked fingers push into my mouth as I fuck his ass, and I come. Hard.

The grip of his hand on the back of my neck, the taste of him on my tongue, the feeling of his eyes on me while waves of pleasure roll through my body… is overwhelming.

And I like it.

We’re staring into each other’s eyes as the remaining waves fade out inside me, our heavy breaths mingling in the small space between us. Until Luca’s gaze drops to my lips.

And I give him what he wants. My lips meet his, and his tongue sweeps my mouth while he tastes himself on me.

When I pull back from him, I’m once again drawn into his eyes. They’re soft, inviting, and… searching.

And I feel the locks start to slide into place once again.

I pull out of him and push myself off the bed, heading into the bathroom without saying a word.

But as I look into the mirror, I don’t see what I was expecting to find. I don’t see the tension, the anger, the hatred, the rigidity, the resentment, the fear…

For the first time, in a long time, I just see me.

I *feel* like me.

The walls aren’t going up, and the doors aren’t closing.

And why Luca is the only one who has been able to unlock and open those doors, I may never know.

But what I do know… is that something is brewing here. With him. And I’m starting to see it.

I never expected him to actually be good for me.

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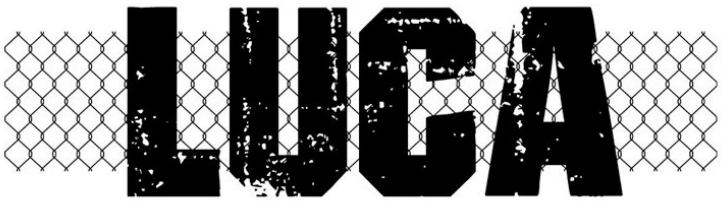
TWENTY-FIVE



"LUCA, OVER HERE." Max waves to me from a corner of the large gym where the grappling tournament is underway.

As I make my way over to him, I let my eyes wander around the space, checking out the rows of mats so multiple matches can take place at one time. The first division of the day is getting started, and I'm pumped to see such a great turnout. It's a bigger tournament than I expected, which adds to the excitement that I've been feeling all morning.

Noah looks up with a smile from his seat on the bench. "Hey, Luca."

"Hey." I smile back at him and set my bag down.

Ty is sitting beside him, intently watching the matches that have started. But he subtly raises his eyes to me with an ever so slight nod of his head.

Swoon.

"Here." Max hands me his phone and I look down at it to see the bracket laid out for my division.

Our division.

Ty is in the same one. We are the same weight with the same experience and skill level, so *of course* he is. I internally sigh as I scan over the matches. We're on opposite ends of the bracket to avoid facing each other, since we're from the same gym. But, as it's a single elimination competition, there *is* a chance we could face each other if we both make it to the final round. Looking at these matches though, it looks like I'll be heading down a hard road to get there.

"Hey!"

I look up from Max's phone to see Seb and Elijah strolling towards us.

“Aw, you came to cheer us on?” I smile sweetly at them as I hand Max his phone back, and Elijah smacks me on the back.

“That, or wipe away your tears,” he says with a smile.

“Fuck off.” I laugh and push him off me.

“Rosa and Adão are on their way,” Seb says as he takes a seat on the bench beside Noah.

I notice a slight furrow in Ty’s brow as he glances towards Seb.

I huff a breath of amusement, a quip about friendship on the tip of my tongue. But I bite it back as Ty quickly looks away, bringing his attention back to the mats.

Has he ever had support like this before?

Wait, no, yes he has. He always had guys in his corner from his gym back home, and they always seemed to have his back. But the way he spoke about not having anyone, maybe it wasn’t what it seemed? I’m confused. And I’m not sure why I’m confused, because everyone *does* seem to like Ty. Am I confused about being confused?

Well, if that doesn’t just sum up all my thoughts about Ty Roscoe.

I sit down on the bench beside him, and his attention on the tournament doesn’t falter at all.

“Looks like you’ll have some people to celebrate you today,” I say in a low voice, so only he can hear me.

His head turns, his dark eyes staring into mine. Softly, and with question.

“You all ready to kick some ass??”

Rosa the wrecking ball pulls our attention from each other, as her and Adão arrive with enthusiastic greetings.

I watch, amused, as Rosa wedges herself between Ty and Noah on the bench, smiling at Ty and trying to engage him in conversation.

Which actually… kind of works? Rosa seems to have figured Ty out a bit, as she gets right into a technical breakdown of each match we watch. And I think we’re all a little blown away when Ty even initiates a conversation with her about a sweep that went awry.

If I was less of a secure man, I might be jealous. But I’m not. Nope. Not even a little bit.

Should I be…?

Nah.

Noah’s division is up next, and as our little Demon Mouse heads onto the mat, it’s fucking *show time.* He dominates all of his matches, as he is a feisty little bastard. Quick, nimble, and can take a body to the mat in a takedown like no other. No one ever sees it coming, and I just fucking love that for him.

“Go Noah!!” Rosa yells as she stands up, watching intently with her hands clasped under her chin, while Noah approaches the mat for the final round of this bracket. Dude is going to take it, I know it.

And also… all those jealous feelings I totally didn’t have, are gone.

I nudge Ty and he just tilts his head towards me slightly, not turning to look at me.

I sigh forcefully, scooting closer to him. “Do you think something is going on there?” I ask quietly.

“Where?” he asks, still not looking at me and with absolutely no interest in his voice whatsoever.

I smack him on the arm and *that* gets him to turn and look at me. With a scowl, but whatever.

I gesture between Rosa and Noah, as Rosa looks like she’s going to burst from pride and excitement.

Ty glances between her and Noah as he gets into position to start his final match. He simply shrugs and doesn’t say anything.

Whatever. I think there is. And that could be *real* cute.

The match begins, and now we’re all on our feet, cheering on our little dude.

He makes some epic takedowns and passes, but the guy he’s fighting is *good*. Like, crazy good.

“Jesus,” Max murmurs from my other side as Noah’s opponent effortlessly sweeps him, switching their positions like it was nothing.

But Demon Mouse puts up an excellent fight. And when he unfortunately has to submit to a rear naked choke, every single one of us is beyond proud of how far he made it.

“Silver!” Rosa throws her hands in the air and smiles widely. She turns to Ty and holds up a hand, waiting for a high five.

He gives her one, albeit without much enthusiasm. But… I think I detect a hint of a smile on his lips as he watches Noah walk towards us.

“Amazing, man!” I pull him into a tight hug, and he laughs against my chest. “Damn dude, that was fucking impressive. He was a beast.”

“Thanks, Luca.” He smiles.

“Good job,” Ty says, and *holy fuck.* It *is* a smile.

I try not to gape at it but fail. He quickly scowls in my direction instead.

“Alright, you guys are up.” Max turns to me and Ty.

“Kick some ass, boys!” Seb yells from the end of the bench as we strip our sweats off.

After a round of good lucks from everyone, we head onto the mats, and I take a deep breath. I’ve been training hard for this, and even though the real purpose of this tournament is to get a good gauge on my grappling with various opponents, I still want to win. And I know I can.

My first match is a guy from the gym that is putting this tournament on, and he looks… mean. He’s standing at the edge of the mat observing me, with arms crossed and a grumpy look on his face. I give him a smile to test the waters and his expression hardens.

Aw. Maybe him and Ty could be friends.

He puts up a hell of a fight, keeping me on my defense for the first minute. But eventually, I gain control. And when he’s on his back and his ankle meets the back of my knee, I quickly turn, grab it, and pull him into a legbar.

I hear Rosa and the guys cheering from the benches, and I send a smile their way. My opponent is eliminated, and I move up to the next round.

As I wait for my next opponent to be determined, I can’t help but seek out another match that is still underway.

Ty is controlling his opponent’s back, making it look easy. He grabs the forearm of his opponent, and just as he is pulling him into a triangle choke, I’m pulled away to my next match.

Each round is more intense and challenging than the last. But the increased, focused training I have done with Ty over the past couple of weeks has paid off. I feel confident in the areas I was struggling in, and I’m controlling each opponent and making it *my* fight.

As I lay an *amazing* takedown on the opponent I’m going to beat in this round, I hear the cheers from the stands. I let the sounds urge me on, creating energy in my body and calm in my mind.

I got this. This is the last round before the final… I can do this.

Except those cheers are also for Ty, as he is on the mat beside mine. He’s still in this too, and if we both win this round… we face each other in

the final.

I'm in closed guard with my opponent, and I smile down at him as his legs wrap around my back. Swiftly, I place my hands on the front of his hips, pushing down and unlocking his feet. The second he's unlocked, I sweep to the side, opening his knee and taking complete control. Then I get him in an armbar, and he submits. Exhilaration rushes in as I stand up and take in the cheers from my teammates.

I'm going to the final.

As I turn to shake hands with my opponent, another loud cheer sounds from the crowd.

Reluctantly, I look over to Ty's match. And see his opponent submitting to him, in a cutting armbar.

Well, fuck.

I watch as Ty stands, expressionless as usual, and casually shakes his opponent's hand. He doesn't meet my eye, and I think that's on purpose.

The referee waves him and I over, along with Max.

I've been to tournaments before where coaches have required teammates to forfeit if they face each other. Usually, it's a gentlemen's agreement, giving the win to whoever has the greater likelihood of winning. I've never been in that situation before though, and as it's the coaches call, I'm not sure what Max will want to do here.

"What do you want to do?" the referee asks Max. "We can forfeit or continue with the match."

Max looks between me and Ty. I bring my eyes to Ty, and he finally looks back at me.

"Either one of you willing to forfeit to the other?" Max asks.

Neither one of us says anything, as we continue to stare at each other. Anger bubbles inside me as he says, and does, nothing.

I'm here for a reason. I'm doing this to actually work on and develop my grappling skills. He's here to *get his head back in it.* Like fuck I'm forfeiting to him.

Especially when I lost our last fight.

"Didn't think so." Max turns to the ref. "They'll continue."

"Alright." The ref backs up and gestures for us to take position in the middle of the mat.

I cast a quick glance towards the benches and see the concern and uncertainty on our teammates faces. And I know it's not just because of

mine and Ty's hostility towards each other. Because now, they don't know whose corner to be in.

As the ref signals for us to begin, the sounds around me fade away as I bring my attention inwards.

Control the hip, anticipate, make him follow me.

As we step towards each other and touch hands, I avoid looking in his eyes. He's just an opponent… nothing more.

He immediately goes for a takedown, but I escape and manage an arm drag, double leg takedown on him instead.

I hear the grunt escape him as he hits the mats, but he recovers quickly. And from there, it's like a fucking dance.

I pass his guard, and a moment later he passes mine. He sweeps me, and then I easily control his back. We're rolling as if we have done this a million times before. Almost like we know each other too well now. I can feel his thoughts and anticipate his movements. I've learned how he thinks, and we're both taking advantage of our training together to keep us on our toes. It's intense, and when the buzzer signals the end of the match, I'm both relieved, and wanting more.

He's in mount position, with one hand on my shoulder and the other on the inside of my opposite arm. We both pause at the sound of the buzzer, and the sounds of the crowd come rushing back in. Ty quickly pushes himself off me to stand up.

I stand as well and immediately look to the scorekeeper.

The first match, for both of us today, that didn't end in submission.

The scorekeeper is still tallying, so I briefly let my gaze travel to Max and the others. Max is standing with arms crossed, eyes on me and Ty, and everyone else is looking nervous while we wait.

And I can't bring myself to look at Ty. I'm still really fucking angry that we're even in this position, as he *doesn't* need to be here.

The ref nods to the scorekeeper and walks over to us. My pulse is thundering as he gets closer, his face giving nothing away. He stands between me and Ty, holding each of our wrists.

"And the winner, by one point, is Tyler Roscoe!"

My head whips towards him so fast I almost break my fucking neck. And thank fuck his face is hidden from my view as the ref lifts his arm in the air, because I want to punch it. *Hard.*

That anger that was bubbling? It’s flowing like red hot fucking lava now.

The second the ref releases my wrist, I start walking. I shrug everyone off as they *congratulate* me, grab my bag, and leave.

That fucking asshole better stay the *fuck* away from me.

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TWENTY-SIX

I SLAM my car door and glare at Luca's Jeep parked outside the gym.

I fucking knew it.

As everyone went out after the tournament, no one else is here. And when I pull the gym door open, I hear him before I see him. The lights are off, except for a few over the punching bags.

Luca has his earbuds in and boxing gloves on, hitting the bag *hard.* Probably picturing my face.

I remain in the shadows, waiting and watching, until he notices me. And when he does, the glare he sends my way almost has me recoiling.

Until he simply turns back to the bag, hitting it even harder now.

For fuck's sake.

I move closer to the bag and into his line of sight, motioning for him to remove the earbuds. His eyes flick to me, but he doesn't stop.

The second I take another step closer, he rips a glove off and removes one of his earbuds. "What the *fuck* do you want?"

Good question.

I shrug, putting my hands in my sweatpants pockets. "Why is this bothering you so much?"

Luca gives me an incredulous look, like I should know why.

"You've lost to me before, why are you so upset about this one?" I ask.

His eyebrows shoot up, as he huffs out a laugh with a slight shake of his head. "You really are a fucking asshole."

He removes his other glove, tosses his earbuds onto the bench and opens a cabinet. When he turns around, he tosses a pair of MMA gloves at me.

“Let’s go,” he says as he pulls his gloves on.

I sigh, not doing the same with mine.

“Come on, Ty. You came here. You want to know why I’m pissed?” He opens his arms wide. “Let’s have a fucking *chat.*”

Rather than take the time to think of a better way to do this, I let his anger seep into me as I drop the gloves to the floor and strip off my sweats. Once I’m in just my fight shorts and gloves, I look into Luca’s eyes. They’re full of fire, like he wants to absolutely destroy me.

“Let’s chat then.” I tap my gloves together in front of my chest. I don’t know why I even came here. When he left the tournament earlier, I felt some weird need to go after him. But with this fucking attitude coming from him, I’m ready to deal with it the only way I know how.

He pushes past me and heads into the cage. I follow, closing the cage door behind me.

We stare at each other for a moment, both knowing we should touch hands to begin this fight.

But we also know that nothing about this is friendly.

Luca moves quickly, closing the distance between us, and landing a lethal kick on my forearm, just as I get my hands up to protect myself.

Fuck, that hurts.

He bounces on his toes, narrowing his eyes at me while I shake it off and prepare to teach this fucker a lesson.

I swoop in in an attempt to take him down to the floor, but his fist comes out and he gets my jaw. And *motherfucker*, I feel that one too, as we’re not even wearing mouthguards.

Fueled by the taste of blood, I bait him with a swing of my left hand. When he raises his hand to block, I duck, wrapping my arms around his knees and taking him down.

He grunts as his back hits the floor hard, and I’m immediately on top of him, landing a punch to his face. But before I can get another one in, he wraps his arms around my neck and his legs around mine to keep me close and restricted.

I’m able to get a couple hits to the side of his head before he drops one arm to elbow my head. The fists and elbows continue to fly between us as he keeps me locked against him with no space for me to maneuver out of this. But eventually, I’m able to apply some shoulder pressure and use my position on top of him to gain control.

Except I can feel the hatred and anger in him, possessing him and urging him on in a way I haven't seen since we came here. He practically snarls as he punches my side *hard* and sweeps me, moving into top position and then passing guard just like I fucking taught him.

The fucker is now standing over me as I'm in an awful position on my back. He has the upper hand, and until he makes his next move, I don't know if I will be able to get on my feet as well, or bring him down here with me.

"I fucking *had* you," he says in a low voice, the spotlight on the ceiling behind him darkening his face so I can't quite make out his expression. But I know it's one of complete disdain, and I know he's talking about the tournament.

I kick up at him, and he knocks my foot away. I'm surprised when I take my chance to get to my feet, and he lets me. He's glaring at me, maintaining his stance and ready to pounce.

"Yeah," I say slowly. "But you didn't."

Luca is quick with a front kick to my stomach and a rush of air escapes me as I stumble backwards. He darts forward, but I raise my hands just in time as his right fist swings at my face. But the fast fucker redirects and lands a left hook to my ribs instead.

"You didn't even need it," he grunts as he brings a knee up to my ribs on the other side.

It takes me a minute to catch up and realize what he's saying as I defend myself against his attack, all while trying to catch my breath.

"I did need it," I pant, striking out and punching his jaw. "Because of you."

His elbow meets my cheekbone, followed by another fist to the ribs.

Fucking fucker.

"Don't blame me for your need to be a complete fucking asshole." He takes a couple steps back and kicks my thigh before I can close the distance. "You weren't even supposed to be there."

Annoyance is now completely taking over. I shrug one shoulder, gesturing around the gym. "And you aren't supposed to be here. But here you are."

If I thought he looked angry before, it's nothing compared to the look on his face now. He suddenly collides with me, bringing us both down to the mat with a hard thump, and unleashes a fury of punches to my face and

body. He's fast and ruthless, as I scramble to defend myself, unable to attack.

Eventually, I'm able to trap his side and roll, moving us so that I am now in mount position. Just like how we finished the tournament.

But this time, the fight is still going. And this time, I can bring myself to look into his eyes.

I do, as I grab his wrists and pin them to the floor on either side of his head. And as I meet his eyes, they are full of hatred.

The only sounds around us are our heavy breaths as I stare down at him. There's a cut above his eye which is swelling and bleeding, and I can feel that one of my lips is busted.

"It had nothing to do with you," I say, my voice low and firm.

"Bullshit," he spits out, and attempts to move out of my grasp. But I hold on. "You saw an opportunity to fuck with me, and you took it."

I'm fighting every urge to stay calm and not punch this asshole straight in the face. Again.

"No," I grit out. "I saw an opportunity to regain my focus and get back on track… and…" I swallow hard, "*didn't* think of how it would fuck with you."

Luca continues to stare up at me, his expression unchanging.

I shake my head slightly. "I can't lose control."

He forcefully pulls his wrists from my grip, hands landing hard on my chest. But as I prepare for another onslaught of punches to the face, I'm surprised when he rolls over instead, sitting up on the octagon floor. He still looks angry. But he's not hitting me, so I guess that's progress.

"And why do you need to take from me so you can have control?"

A tightness settles in my chest as I realize what he's saying. I *did* know how much this tournament meant to him. And a couple months ago, I wouldn't have even questioned stripping him of a lead spot in our bracket.

But things have changed now.

"Do you really hate me *that* much?" he asks, and I swear I sense a pleading undertone to his question.

Or maybe I just want to hear it.

As he stares back at me, waiting for my answer, I shake my head. "No."

Luca tilts his head, waiting for more.

I let out a small sigh. "You're fucking with my head, Mitchell. I'm distracted, I'm not performing like I know I can and should, and it's

unacceptable. My fight, and my progress, is the one thing I know for absolute certain I can control, and I'm losing that control." I pause for a moment. "I'm afraid to lose that control. I needed the pressure of this tournament to prove to myself I can do this and get my head back in it."

Luca remains silent, observing me.

"It had nothing to do with you."

"You want nothing to do with me."

He says it like a statement, but it's a loaded question. He's asking me. Asking me if the distraction is worth it, or if whatever we have going on between us will end because I can't handle it.

But I don't want the distraction to stop.

I shake my head. "I think I proved today that I can do both."

His eyes narrow, and the corner of my split lip tilts up, painfully.

"But back to my original question." I wipe the blood from my lip. "Why is this bothering you so much? I think there's more to this than the fact I *wasn't supposed to be there*."

His jaw ticks, but then he sighs, his eyes dropping. "Just… feeling sorry for myself."

My brows draw together as I take in the defeated look about him. "Why? You got silver in a huge and talented bracket."

He nods, ever so slightly. "But it's not gold. After all that work, it's not quite good enough, is it?"

Realization hits me, as I think back on what he shared with me about his parents, and how hard they were on him. That nothing was ever good enough. MMA is also the one thing he has that he can control. But he wasn't able to today.

He did everything right. He trained hard, he put aside his anger and hatred towards me, he was vulnerable with me when asking for help… and then I took it from him in the end. We both needed this for seemingly different reasons… but I think it was the same reason. We just wanted a bit more control.

"I'm not sorry I won," I say, observing him as he sits on his knees on the floor across from me.

"Of course you're not." He moves to get up, but I quickly reach out to grab his wrist.

"But you're a great fighter, Luca, and you deserve to be here."

His eyes meet mine as he freezes.

Silence surrounds us as we look into each other's eyes, and his finally soften. We each take in the blood and swelling on our faces, the evidence of our frustration and anger being let out to play. Then, he nods slightly, and the tightness in my chest lifts.

"So," I grip his wrist tighter, "you going to let me celebrate my win?"

He yanks his wrist out of my grasp, narrowing his eyes at me. But he doesn't move, and a light dances in his eyes as the corner of his lips quirk up.

"I guess. But just so you know, I'll be winning this one."

My chest thumps at the look in his eyes, as they trail down my body.

And as our lips crash together, a new tension forms within these cage walls. One that we are both ready and eager to unleash.

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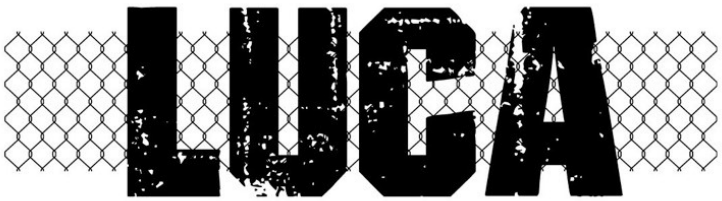
TWENTY-SEVEN



TY'S back hits the floor with a thump as I land on top of him, lips still locked. Our gloved hands roam as we devour each other, unable to get enough.

The cut above my eye still bleeding and swelling, and my jaw is going to be bruised and sore tomorrow… but I don't care. And when Ty winces as I subtly bite his busted lip, it's obvious he doesn't care either, as his hand wraps around the back of my neck, pulling me in to deepen our kiss even more.

It's messy, frantic, and full of the crazed energy we brought into this cage. I feel an intense need to let this energy take over as I rock my hips against his, and feel that he is just as hard as I am. As I grind against him, he groans and tightens his grip on the back of my neck, urging me on.

We have met countless times in the cage since we have known each other, our battle fueled by hate and the need to dominate. We've attempted to take everything we could from each other, as ruthlessly as we could. And now, in this cage, we're fueled by something different. Something that wasn't there before. There's a reason why losing to him today bothered me so much. And there's a reason why he came here.

I bite his lip again and his fingers grip my hair, pulling hard.

Fighting or fucking, we're still ruthless.

His other hand trails down my body as I lean over him, and excitement stirs. I pull away from his lips, grabbing his hand before it reaches my shorts. Confusion briefly settles in his features before I remove his glove and place his hand back on my waistband.

The corner of his lips quirk up slightly, and *my god*. Who knew the slightest trace, ever, of a smile could turn me on so much?

As our lips once again smash together, he pulls open my shorts and slides a hand in.

I release a groan as I bring my lips to his neck. He rolls his head to the side with a moan, giving me better access to nibble and suck under his ear.

“Fuck,” I pant, as the pressure is building already while he strokes my cock. “That feels so fucking good.”

His other hand once again finds the back of my head, as he turns it towards him. His tongue pushes past my lips as he holds my head with one hand and jerks me off with the other, taking complete control of me. I can barely hold myself up over him, my arms starting to shake with the overwhelming sensations.

And as much as I want to lose myself to this pleasure, I push myself back so I’m sitting over his hips. His hand is still on my cock, and his dark eyes follow my movements as I remove my gloves and undo his shorts.

I grasp him in my hand, and he releases a breath of pleasure as his head rolls back slightly with eyes closed.

“Mm,” I hum, watching him as we pump each other. “You’re so fucking hard for me.”

His eyes fly open and meet mine again. I smile, increasing my pace on him. “You want to celebrate. What do you think I should do to you?”

His tongue runs along his bottom lip and his chest rises and falls with a heavy breath.

I lean down over him again, brushing my lips against his as I continue to stroke him hard and fast, just how he likes it. “What do you say, Tiger? How do you want to use me?”

He releases my cock, his hand moving quickly to grasp my jaw.

I stop stroking him, and look into his eyes, waiting.

“I’m going to fuck this mouth.”

I rip my jaw from his grasp and move down his body, ready to make those perfect wishes come true. The second his shorts are down, his cock is in my mouth. Ty groans as his fingers sink into my hair, and he raises his hips to do exactly what he said he would.

As he thrusts up into my mouth, I open up to let him in deep. I want more, I want all of him. The intense urgency that was present during our fight is still taking over me, and I *need* to satisfy that feeling. I push his hips

down forcefully and his grip in my hair tightens. But as I take his full length right to the back of my throat, he loosens his grip and groans again.

The feral look on his face sends a thrill right up my spine. We keep our eyes locked as I pull off him and take him all the way in again.

“Oh my god,” he grunts. His hands grip my head, and his hips raise again. I can barely even contain myself as I let him fuck my throat, watching as he loses himself to the feeling of pleasure.

“Fuck,” he pants, “fuck you’re so good.”

My eyes fly up to meet his as an intense excitement radiates through me and my dick *aches*.

I pull back and stare up at him.

His brows draw together as he stares back at me. “What?”

“Oh my god,” is the only thing I can say.

His eyes drop to his dick and back up to me. “What?”

“I like that.” I nod seriously at him.

“Like what?”

“When you tell me I’m good.”

His features twist in confusion. “Fuck off.”

“Hm,” I shake my head, “no that’s not quite it.”

Suddenly he sits up, pushes me onto my back and straddles me so we’ve switched positions.

His hand finds my throat, and the excitement grows. His gaze is piercing as he looks down at me. But not with malice… with interest, and… understanding.

“You want to know that you’re good?”

My eyes flick between his, and I don’t say anything. I’m not even sure what it is I want, I just know something in me *happened* when he said those words, and I want more.

He leans closer to me, so I feel his breath on my lips. “I’m fucking hard for you, and close to coming from your annoying as fuck mouth.” He lifts his thumb from my neck and rubs it over my bottom lip, his eyes following. “This mouth that can take my cock so well.”

I’m lit up like Times fucking Square as he rakes his eyes down my body, and lowers his hand from my throat to push my shorts down. Then he brings it back up to my mouth, pushing a finger past my lips. I open, sucking it as I keep my eyes on him.

When he pulls it out of my mouth, he lowers his lips to mine again, whispering, “Be good.”

He nudges my knee up with his as he shifts his weight off my hips and lowers his hand. As he presses his wet finger to my ass, my eyes close with a groan.

I don’t even know what is happening to me as he moves down to take my cock in his mouth, all while rubbing my hole. The sensations of his hot mouth on my cock, his finger on my ass, and the effects of his words on me, I’m close to coming already. And when he wets his finger again in his mouth, the excitement is almost too much to bear.

He pushes his finger inside me as he watches my weeping cock. And as he meets my eyes, a subtle smile tugs at his lips. “Yeah, that’s it.”

“Holy fuck,” I squirm and grab his arm as he lowers his mouth to my cock again and takes me in. Everything inside me is buzzing, as his praise is turning me the *fuck* on, and his finger is rubbing right up against my prostate.

He continues to finger my ass while sucking me, and I let him take full control, giving everything up to him. My hands are in his hair and scratching at his arms as he works me until I’m seeing fucking stars.

“Fuck, Ty, I’m going to come.”

“Mm,” he moans around me, curling his finger.

“Oh, fuck.” I lift my head to look down at him, the pressure rising up my legs and the tingles spreading throughout my body. I come hard with a grunt, grasping his arm in a bruising grip.

He doesn’t take his mouth off me, looking up with those dark eyes as he swallows me down. And as some of my cum escapes out the corner of his mouth, I think this is the hottest thing I’ve ever seen.

He releases me from his mouth, moving up onto his knees and taking his dick into his hand. But I quickly sit up, batting his hand away so I can do the honors.

“Come for me, Tiger,” I pant as I jerk him and watch his stomach muscles contract.

“Oh, fuck,” he grunts, his hips stuttering.

I wrap my lips around his cock as he comes, swallowing him down with a moan of pleasure.

When I release him, my hand makes its way down to my cum that Ty so hotly dribbled down my dick, and I run my fingers through it. But as I lift

them to my mouth, Ty grabs my wrist, staring down at me.

"That's mine," he says in a low voice, then brings my fingers to his lips, licking them clean.

Ok. Now *that's* the hottest thing I've ever seen.

He releases my fingers and lowers himself down to sit on the floor with a heavy breath.

I smile at him.

"What now?" he asks, narrowing his eyes at me.

"You like cum."

He shoots me an annoyed look. "And you like to be told you're a good boy."

I shrug with another smile, trying to ignore the twitch in my cock at those beautiful words.

But I bite my tongue on what I want to say next.

There's something else you like too, isn't there?

As I look at him sitting across from me, I don't think I need to ask that. Because the fact that he's here at all speaks volumes. I thought he didn't care, and he proved me wrong.

And I know what the events of this day proved to me.

I've got some serious feels for Ty Roscoe.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

"FUCK," I murmur to myself as I buckle my seat belt. My jaw fucking hurts, and my lip is throbbing. Luca's punches carry a lot of weight as he's a natural striker, and I put myself directly in his line of fire last night. And a few of those hits, I let him have.

Because I deserved it.

At the time, I may not have completely understood why I did that, but I do now. It may not have been the healthiest way to talk and get everything out there, but we did it and we said what we needed to say.

And I finally let myself feel what I've been ignoring for a while.

I went there because I care about him.

I let him hit me because I care about him.

I don't hate him.

I want him.

As I drive to the gym, a feeling of anticipation stirs. After Luca and I left the cage last night, we silently went our separate ways, and I haven't spoken to him since. But we left with a new understanding of each other. We didn't need to say anything else, and for me, I feel good about where things stand.

My phone buzzes in the cupholder as I pull up to a red light. Like he's reading my fucking mind, Luca's name lights up the screen with a text.

I pick it up, sliding my thumb across the screen.

LUCA

You on your way to the gym?

Yeah

thumbs up emoji

I sigh as I stare down at the screen.

And what does that mean?

The light turns green, so I toss the phone on the passenger's seat. I'm only a few minutes away so I guess I'll find out soon enough.

When I get to the gym and pull into the parking lot, I see him leaning up against his Jeep, head down and looking at his phone. He's wearing tie-dye sweatpants with a bright yellow hoodie, so he's hard to miss.

He looks up from under his hood as I get out of my car, dirty blond curls sticking out over his forehead and a smirk on his lips.

Usually I would walk towards the gym and ignore him, and I think about doing just that. But something stops me, and I walk over to him.

He gives me that irritating smile that burrows right under my skin, and I immediately regret my decision.

"What do you want?" I ask with a sigh.

He huffs out a laugh, and I take in the cut above his eye. It's bruising and swelling, along with some bruising starting on his cheekbone and down his jaw.

His eyes roam over my face as well. "Nice face."

"You too." I adjust my bag on my shoulder and glance towards the gym door.

When I bring my eyes back to him, his smirk softens.

We stand there in silence for a moment, quietly looking at each other, and I am all too aware that I don't want to move from this spot.

Until Luca opens his mouth again.

"Did you know that a Tiger's punch can kill you?"

"What?"

Luca nods seriously, eyebrows raised. "Mm-hm. A swipe of a Tiger's front paw is enough to kill a person."

He looks so serious about this as his eyes flick between mine, that I fight off a smile.

And when his eyes then drop to my lips, I'm fighting off more than just a smile.

But we're not fighting anymore, are we?

I step towards him, and his eyes widen slightly. As I press him up against his Jeep, he exhales.

"Well," I say, my lips close to his, "good thing you survived."

He nods slightly. “Good thing.”

Our lips meet and our bags drop to the ground. He grunts slightly as I push him harder into his Jeep, but his hands find my hips and pull me into him. The pain in my lip is biting as my tongue slides against his, but I don’t stop.

I know anyone could see us out here. And I’m surprised when that thought does nothing but urge me on. I raise a hand to the side of his face, and he winces slightly as my thumb lands on his bruising jaw. But he also doesn’t stop, and instead lifts his hands up my back, taking even more.

Eventually we break apart, and I bring my thumb up to wipe my lip, which is now bleeding again.

Luca looks down at it and nods slightly. “That’s hot.”

I scoff, picking up my bag. “Let’s go.”

He follows me into the gym, and as soon as we enter, I want to back right out.

Every set of eyes lands on us, and I immediately feel the scrutiny as everyone sees the evidence of our fight last night.

Max is standing on the mats with Adão and Elijah, and his expression darkens as he takes in our appearance.

Elijah glances between us with worry, and I hear Seb let out a low whistle from his spot at the heavy bags.

“Seriously?” Max asks, his voice low and full of anger.

I swallow and adjust my bag on my shoulder, wondering how we’re going to explain this.

“Uh, yeah,” Luca murmurs. “So, about this-”

“I don’t want to hear any excuses.” Max gestures between us. “This doesn’t fly here. I’ve been more than understanding of this rivalry between you two, but this is too fucking much. You are *teammates* now. Fucking act like it, or you can leave.”

I nod, and Luca does the same. “Yeah, we know,” he says.

Max still looks *livid.* And I don’t blame him. “You agreed to face each other yesterday. If you can’t handle that, then we have some major problems here. I’m going to give you one more chance to work through this, and whatever the fuck happened last night, is never going to happen again. You hear me?”

I nod again. I’m not sure what to say or do here, as this is not exactly how it looks. Yeah, we did beat the shit out of each other, but not

necessarily for the reason he thinks we did.

And we did already work it out…

Luca smiles at me. Fucking *smiles.* I shoot him a look, as this is not the fucking time to fuck around.

He winks and turns back to Max. “We hear you, loud and clear. Some of what happened last night we would like to keep going with, but the beating each other up thing, yeah, we can stop that.”

I sigh and rub my forehead.

What the fuck…

Max’s brow furrows but he, smartly, chooses to ignore that. “I need to know how you plan to sort your shit out.”

Luca waves a hand in the air. “Oh, we already did.”

Max crosses his arms, not looking impressed. “Do tell.”

Luca looks at me, his eyes briefly dropping to my lips. A rush of something similar to excitement courses through me as he gives me this look in front of everyone. And I can’t seem to pull my eyes from him as his lips tilt up in a lopsided smile. I’m rooted to the spot, just staring back at him.

“We had a chat,” Luca says, eyes still locked on mine. “And, I guess we can say we get along pretty well now. Don’t we, Tiger?”

I finally rip my eyes away from him to glance at Max, who is watching us in confusion. I nod, looking back to Luca. “We’ve got it sorted out.”

Luca smiles, eyes dropping to my lips again. “Definitely.”

When we turn back to everyone else, the gym is silent as they all stare at us.

“So,” Luca nods, “I guess we better get to work then. Where do you want us, coach?”

Max raises his eyebrows, looking between us. “Uh, weights today I guess. Since your faces are fucked.”

“Ten-four.” Luca salutes him and heads off towards the locker room.

I awkwardly nod at Max, adjust my bag on my shoulder and follow Luca. I can still feel everyone’s eyes on us, and I try to ignore them as I glare at Luca’s back.

Who knows what they’re all thinking about that, but I have an idea. Luca wasn’t exactly subtle.

But as Luca strips his hoodie off and my eyes immediately fall to his bare abs, I guess he’s not the only one who is lacking subtlety.

“Please?”

“No.”

“Come on, everyone else knows!”

“No one knows anything.” I set my weights back on the rack and turn around to face Rosa, who is staring up at me with her hands on her hips.

She levels me with a look. “Something more than just a fight happened last night, according to Seb’s version of yours and Luca’s showdown with Max this morning. He said you guys were *weird* and *sorted your shit out.*” She tilts her head. “So, what happened?”

“We fought, we sorted it out.”

“My *god*.” Rosa tilts her head back with a groan. “Luca.” She turns to him, finally letting me leave the weight rack.

“Yeah, babe.” He sits up on the bench, finishing his chest flys.

“Spill.”

Luca’s eyes slide to me as I grab a towel. I eye him as I wipe my forehead, waiting for him to say or do something stupid.

He shrugs. “We fought, we sorted it out.”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake!” Rosa throws her hands in the air. “Fucking men!”

Luca laughs as he stands up and walks over to me. He reaches behind me to grab a towel as well.

“What exactly do you want to know, Rosa?” Luca asks, rubbing the towel over his face. “You want to know just how we *made up?*”

My eyes whip to him and he smirks.

Rosa looks between us curiously. “Yeah… this is fucking weird, so… what happened?”

“Hm.” Luca crosses his arms, observing her for a moment. “Well, after I kicked Ty’s ass, he served some revenge on mine.”

I close my eyes with a sigh. There’s that something stupid.

“Yeah, I know, you fought. I get it.” Rosa sighs as well. “Ok, fine. You’re men, you sorted your shit out with your fists. Nice.”

Luca winks at her. “Among other things.”

“Fuck’s sake…” I murmur, moving away from him and back to the weight rack.

“Ok, so there *is* more,” Rosa says, pointing between us as she backs up towards the door to the weight room. “I *will* get to the bottom of this.”

“Oh, that’s right here.” Luca opens his arms wide with a smile.

Rosa looks at him with confusion, and I turn to the weight rack to hide my expression, which is likely one of both horror and amusement.

“Anyway…” she says, “regardless of how this happened, I’m glad you guys are finally getting along.”

I look up to the mirror in front of me to see her leaving the weight room. And leaving Luca and I alone.

“That was fun,” Luca says, sitting back down on the bench.

I huff out a breath, turning to face him. “You want to just go out there and make an announcement right now? Because you might as well have.”

He waves a hand in the air, dismissing that apparently absurd accusation. “No one knows, you’re fine.”

I sigh, trying not to lose it on him. “If you can keep your fucking mouth shut for a minute maybe we would be.”

He tilts his head slightly, observing me for a minute. “You don’t want anyone to know.”

I shake my head, looking down at the weights in my hands. “It’s not that.”

“Well don’t keep me in suspense here, Tyler, I’m on the edge of my seat.”

I set the weights down and look up at him. “Fuck, you’re annoying.”

He smiles. “You’ve said.” He then stands, walking over to me again. His eyes roam my face as his smile softens. “Finish your workout. I have something to show you.”

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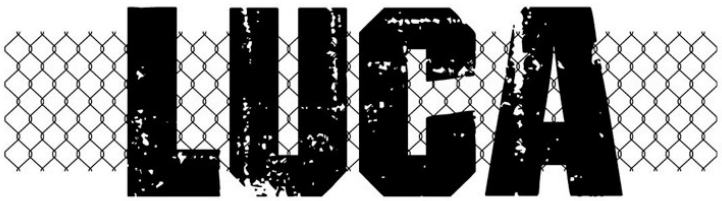
TWENTY-NINE



"WHERE ARE WE GOING?" Ty asks from the passenger's seat of my Jeep.

"It's a secret," I say as I turn off the highway, taking us to the outskirts of the city.

"You drive like a maniac," he murmurs, looking out the window. He then turns to gesture towards the stereo. "And what the fuck are we listening to?"

"One of the greatest boybands of all time." I roll my eyes at him. Seriously, does he know nothing about music? "One Direction is legendary. How do you *not* know them?"

He shakes his head with a sigh, looking out the window again.

I ignore his broodiness, humming along to *One Thing*, until I turn down a quiet, dark, dirt road.

Ty peers out into the dark as the streetlights fade away behind us. "Are you going to murder me?"

I put the Jeep in park when I reach a clearing and huff out a laugh. "Oh, Ty."

He just stares at me as I turn the Jeep off and hop out. He gets out as well, and glances around at the woods surrounding us. When he looks to me, I smile and open my arms wide.

"Ta-da!"

I can't quite make out his expression in the dark, but for some reason it seems to be confusion.

"What?" he asks.

I point up to the sky, and he tilts his head back. But he just drops his head, again asking, “What?”

“Ugh.” I tip my head back with a groan. “The stars, you idiot! Your favorite relaxing activity.”

He somehow looks even more confused. “Where the fuck do you keep getting this idea I like looking at stars?”

“You *told* me.”

“No, *you* said that. I said nothing.”

“Exactly.” I point at him. “You lead me to believe that’s what you were doing. How else was I supposed to know what your favorite relaxing fun time activity is?”

I can see his jaw ticking, even in the dark.

I smile back at him. We have so much fun together.

“Let’s gaze.” I hop onto the hood of my Jeep, tapping the spot beside me.

He sighs, but joins me.

We lay back on the hood, gazing up at the sparkling stars. It’s a clear, cool night and it looks like every single star is out.

But my eyes immediately slide to the moon.

A waxing crescent moon. The first lunar phase after the new moon, when one is supposed to take their first steps towards making their wishes come true.

“The waxing crescent moon rises before noon,” I say, keeping my eyes on it.

Ty doesn’t say anything, but I hear him move his head to look at it.

“And sets before midnight. So, this is actually a setting moon.”

We’re silent for another moment as we both look up at it. I let those familiar, comfortable feelings settle inside me as I take it in, the light entering the darkness once again in its cycle of life.

“This phase of the moon is supposed to symbolize moving forward with new light,” I say. “Lighting a fire under your ass to do what you need to do, with ambition and energy.”

Ty subtly adjusts beside me. “Well, you’re just a wealth of knowledge.”

I snort a laugh, raising my arm to place it under my head. Then I face him, ready to move forward, and share something huge.

“I have a secret.”

His head turns towards me, and I can just faintly make out his features in the dark. And having this blanket of darkness helps me take this step.

I take in a big breath, and exhale. “The unicorn is for me.”

His brows draw together. “Huh?”

“My tattoo.” I nod. I’m in this now, I need to do it. “I said it was for my sister, but… it’s for me.”

His lips press together as he observes me.

“The unicorn is my favorite animal. The whimsy, the magic, the colors… I just love them so much.”

Ty is silent as I take in another big breath. I just bared my fucking soul to him and told him something I’ve never told anyone. This is huge, and I feel so much lighter.

“You…” he says slowly, “you know they’re not real… right?”

I sigh. “Yeah, I know.” I turn my head to look up to the sky again. “But they’re still fucking awesome, and I wish they were.”

I feel his eyes on me for a beat longer before he also turns back to the stars. “Ok then.”

Relief rushes through me that he is accepting of my secret. I’m not quite sure why I felt like I needed to tell him this, but it just feels right. And I’m glad I did. “God, that feels good to get off my chest.”

Ty lets out a breath of amusement.

“Now you tell me a secret.” I look at the moon again, thanking her for giving me the kick in the ass I needed.

“Like what?”

“I don’t know…” I shrug. “Let the moon guide you.”

“I don’t have any secrets.”

“Oh, Tyler. We both know that’s not true.” I turn my head to him, but he keeps looking up, and just shakes his head.

“Ok, well, I guess I’ll just start guessing then.” I take a big breath in, ready to get into this.

But he stops me before I can get my first guess out. Which was going to be that he’s a secret Swiftie.

“No, for the love of fuck, do not.” He rolls his head towards me, and I give him a big smile.

But my smile falls, as my eyes adjust in the dark and take in the look on his face. I see something past the usual hardness, and I think it’s fear.

“What?” I ask quietly.

I see his hand fidget, and I refrain from reaching out to grab it.

"I have no fucking idea how to do this," he says.

I nod, knowing what he means.

This. Us.

Based on what he's shared with me so far, I can see how this is probably all new to him. And not just the dick part of it.

Both of us are silent for several moments as we look at each other. I'm surprised by this level of vulnerability he's sharing with me, but I also know that's likely all I'm going to get.

Eventually, my smile returns. "You just need to let the moon show you the way."

It may be dark, but I absolutely can see the eye roll as he turns his head away again.

I chuckle, adjusting myself on the hood of the Jeep and looking for Orion. And Uranus. Because apparently that's visible this time of year, and well… I'm the type of person to find that really fucking funny.

But as we quietly observe the stars, a thought I've had since last night wrestles its way to the forefront of my mind.

"You called me Luca," I say quietly.

I hear Ty turn his head towards me, as I keep my eyes up and on Orion.

"Last night. For the first time ever, you called me Luca." I look towards him, and he nods slightly.

I take a moment to gaze back at him thoughtfully. "I don't think I like it."

A smile spreads across his face and a light laugh escapes him. And holy fuck, did that just happen? Did Tyler Roscoe just laugh?

I smile as well, unable to look away.

I wish it wasn't so dark.

"Want to know another secret?" I ask.

He huffs out a breath. "You're going to tell me anyway."

I nod, still smiling. "I like cum as much as you do."

He shakes his head. "That's not a secret."

"Suppose not," I say with a shrug, and we both look back up to the sky. "We could have a lot more fun if you fuck me bare though."

His head whips back towards me and I chuckle. "Get tested and we'll have a cum party. I'm good to go."

"I am too."

My eyes widen as I stare back at him. “You… went?”

“I went.”

“You’re good?”

“I’m good.”

I’m off the hood of the Jeep before I can even process how fucking hot that is. “Well, what the fuck are we doing here then!?”

I think we might have put a hole in the wall as the door to my apartment crashes open, and Ty pushes me against it. His lips forcefully land on mine, and even though it was just earlier this afternoon we were doing this against my Jeep in the gym parking lot, I’ve been craving this.

The second the door is kicked shut, I’m pulling his hoodie off while he does the same to me. Our clothes litter the floor as we make our way into my bedroom, panting, grabbing, and frantic.

As we kiss, hot and dirty with teeth nipping and lips trailing, that fear I saw in him earlier is gone. The wild Tiger is back.

The back of my knees hit the bed and Ty starts to push me onto it, but I push back against him and remain standing.

He gives me a warning look, and I smirk at him.

“There’s something I want, Tiger.”

Ty waits, hands gripping my hips.

“You never did have my cinnamon roll.”

His brow furrows, and yeah, fair. I never did explain that.

I slide my hand into the waistband of his underwear and wrap my hand around his hard cock. My lips land on his neck, my tongue running up to his ear. “I want you to eat my ass. Use your tongue to open me up and get me ready for your cock. Then, you’re going to fuck me right into that mattress. Can you do that?”

His hand slides up my back, his fingers winding in my hair. He then pulls hard, yanking my head back so he can look into my eyes. His gaze is dark and wanting, sending my heart into a frenzy.

“I can,” he says in a low voice. “If you can take it like a good boy.”

Well, fuck me.

My entire body melts as he whips me around and pushes me face down over the bed. He drops to his knees, and now my heart is fucking *rioting*.

The second his hot tongue glides over my hole, I'm fucking done for.

"Oh, fuck," I moan, gripping the sheets and pushing my ass back into him.

He licks again, sending a jolt of pleasure right through me. And when he groans and pushes his tongue inside me, I could fall apart.

I let him have me, and dominate me, as he does exactly what I want. He licks and sucks, fucking my ass with his tongue, and I am barely able to control myself. I'm writhing underneath him, groaning into the bed and my cock is *leaking*. And when he pushes a finger into me and reaches between my legs to stroke my cock, I am damn near ready to explode.

I reluctantly turn around and he pulls back, wiping his mouth. My eyes drop to the cut on his lip, and *fuck*. That's still hot.

His lips tilt up in a smirk, so I raise my eyes to his.

"Guess you really are a good boy."

"Jesus fucking Christ." I pull him up onto the bed with me and slam my lips to his before I combust right here.

He hisses, as I'm sure I probably just fucked his lip up *again*, but neither one of us stops. He kicks his boxers off and I immediately move down to take his cock in my mouth. The taste of his precum on my tongue has me feeling all kinds of excited, and his groans urge me to take even more from him.

I slide my hand up his thigh, cupping his balls as I suck him. Ty lets out a moan as his grip on my arms tightens, so I push my luck a little further. I let my finger slide over his taint, dangerously close to his hole. And he moans again.

Oh, fuck yes. New goal unlocked.

But right now, I need to be fucked. And I can't wait any longer.

I release him from my mouth and look up at him with a smirk.

"Alright, now fuck me."

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THIRTY

LUCA CONTINUES to smirk up at me as his hand grasps his hard cock, and he slowly strokes himself.

My eyes stay on him, as I reach into the drawer by his bed and grab the lube. As I pour some onto my fingers and stroke my cock, excitement grows within me. As much as I've tried to suppress it, I've been looking forward to fucking him again.

I kneel between his legs and swipe my lubed fingers over his hole, causing him to moan and briefly close his eyes. And as he does, I can't help but lean over him and gently press my lips to his.

After a moment, I pull back and he looks up at me with a hesitant question in his eyes. One that I feel as well.

I don't know why I did that… I just needed it.

But luckily, I don't have to question it any further as he places a hand on my chest and pushes me back, rolling over to shove his ass in the air.

Wordlessly, I grab his hip with one hand and line myself up, pushing into him.

Luca drops his head to the bed with a moan, and the feeling of his tight ass around my cock as I bottom out pulls a groan from deep within my chest.

"Fuck," I pant, running a hand over his ass and up his back.

I pull back and slam into him, immediately bringing this back into our territory. Rough, hard, and fast.

As I pound into him, I take in the way Luca's back and shoulder muscles flex and the sounds of his groans filling the room. My eyes trail

over his ink and land on the unicorn. The fucking horse with a yellow horn on its head and a pastel mane billowing around it. Seriously. The fuck…

Luca pushes up onto his hands and grinds back against me... *hard.*

I tighten my grip on him to keep from losing my balance, and push him forward with a hard thrust into his ass. He smiles back at me over his shoulder, then rolls his hips.

And *fuck*… that feels good.

He does it again, and my grip loosens so he can continue to grind against me, my senses sharpening and the pressure in my pelvis building.

Until I reach down, grab his shoulder, and pull him up against me. I slide my hand up to his throat and he takes a breath in.

He attempts to move his hips again, but I hold him tight against my chest.

He grunts in displeasure, and I smirk against his ear.

“That felt good,” I say, and I feel him exhale. “But you told me to fuck you. So take my cock like I know you can, Mitchell.”

A small moan escapes him as he practically melts against me, leaning back on my chest.

I keep my hand on his neck and my other on his hip, as I pull back and thrust into him hard. He grunts, grasping his cock and stroking.

“Harder, Tiger,” Luca pants. “Take control. I know you want it. Fuck me.”

My grip on his neck tightens as I fuck him harder, his words feeding my want.

“Come on, give it to me,” he grunts. “You can do it.”

Now I wish he would just shut up.

“I said *harder.*”

That’s it.

I forcefully push him down to the bed, grab his tattooed leg, and flip him over to face me.

He looks up at me with a goading smile, so I reach down and grab his jaw. Satisfaction settles, as he winces from the injuries I inflicted on him last night. I angle his face down to me, grasping his jaw tight.

“You want me to take control?” I ask.

He stares up at me and quietly widens his legs, inviting me back in.

I release his jaw, and line my cock up to his ass. “Good.”

I forcefully push into him, and his head tilts back with a grunt. My lips drop to his neck as I fuck him, biting his soft skin. He inhales sharply, bringing his hand to the back of my head, asking for more.

As I bite, lick and suck his neck, shoulder and chest, his cock is weeping onto his tattooed abs, and he momentarily loses himself. His eyes close and his hands fall away from me as I fuck him, marking him with my mouth and rubbing his precum up and down his cock.

Until he's suddenly pushing me onto my back and climbing on top of me.

He smirks as he reaches behind him, lowering himself onto my cock again.

"That was fun, but it's my turn again." He then leans over me, whispering against my lips. "Unless you still want to dominate me… then you'll have to take it back."

Before I can respond, he's grinding on me, rocking his hips and pushing down on my chest to keep me from fighting back.

And it feels fucking incredible.

"Tell me how good it feels," Luca says as he looks down at me, and I do nothing to fight him off.

I hesitate, as I want to take this power away from him and put him in his place, but I also find myself desperately wanting to fill his needs, as he fills me with pleasure. As he continues to ride me, the tingles are rising up my legs, and I know I'm done for.

"You feel so fucking good on my cock, Mitchell."

Luca moans, and looks like he's trying hard to hold back. "You want to come?"

"Fuck yeah," I pant, my hand moving to his dick.

But he grabs my hand before I get there, and stills.

"What the fuck?" I ask, narrowing my eyes at him.

"Where are you going to come?" he asks.

I should have put him in his *fucking* place.

I glare at him, and he just smirks back at me.

"In your ass." I pull my hand out of his grip.

"Mm," Luca nods. He leans over me, placing his hands on either side of my head. "And when you're done filling my ass, you're going to eat me out again, aren't you?"

My pulse quickens as I look into his eyes, and I just nod.

He brings his head down, lightly brushing his lips over mine. “Then you’ll give me a taste.”

My arms wrap around him, so I can roll us and move on top of him. Wasting no time, I’m thrusting into him again, and the pressure inside me is overwhelming. The tingles take over, as I come inside him with a groan.

And the second I pull out and bring my mouth to his ass, Luca grasps his cock, moaning as he shoots cum up his abs. I swipe my tongue over his hole, tasting my cum and feeling him tremble.

Luca watches as I crawl back up his body, and he runs his fingers up his abs. He licks his cum off his fingers, and I immediately push my tongue into his mouth, giving him a taste of me as I taste him.

His hands run down my sides, as our kiss deepens. Then it softens and slows, evolving into something that is unlike us.

But somehow feels just right.

My eyes open, adjusting to the early morning light and taking in the colorful room. Luca is still asleep next to me in bed, on his stomach with his head half under his pillow and arms and legs stretched out. He’s almost taking up the whole fucking bed, and I’m not even surprised. He’s also a chaotic sleeper.

I slide out of bed and make my way out of the bedroom, finding my sweatpants on the floor. I pull my phone out of the pocket, checking the time. It’s 5:00 am, my usual wake up time. I glance back at Luca sprawled out in bed. He said he was working today, so who fucking knows what time he wakes up. Probably one minute before he has to be out the door.

I pull my sweatpants on and consider going in to wake him. I have to be at work in a couple hours, and my car is still at the gym. So he either needs to drive me to get it or I need to take a cab. But as I watch him, sleeping peacefully while covered in pillows and his purple comforter, I figure I can wait a bit.

In the kitchen, I find the coffee maker and get a pot started. Shortly after it begins brewing, Luca appears in the doorway to his bedroom, sleepily

rubbing his eyes with his hair sticking out in every possible direction.

“Fuck, you’re an early riser.” He yawns. “Figures.”

“And you take up the entire fucking bed.” I watch him as he heads right for the coffee maker and pulls out the pot. “It’s not done,” I say, annoyed that he can’t wait a couple more minutes, even though it pauses brewing.

He shrugs. “It’s done enough.” He pours two cups and turns to face me. “Let me guess. Black.”

I just hold my hand out for the mug, not wanting to admit to him he’s right.

He rolls his eyes and pushes the mug into my hand, then opens the fridge to pull out cream for his coffee.

I take a sip, watching him pour the cream into his mug.

He turns around, leaning against the counter opposite me. His eyes travel over my face and land on the cut on my lip. “It looks worse today.”

I huff out a breath. “Feels it.” My gaze lifts to the cut above his eye, which is still swollen and is bruising quite a bit. “What will work say about that?”

He shrugs, taking a drink of his coffee. “We’ll find out.”

Annoyance bubbles under the surface at his ability to be so nonchalant about this. Of course he wouldn’t be concerned, because with his fucking luck he could just find another job by tomorrow if this one doesn’t work out.

But as I sit with this feeling for a moment, I don’t think it is annoyance… Because when I really think about it, I actually admire his ability to shrug it off and just do what’s right for him. The annoyance isn’t towards him… it’s towards me and my *inability* to shrug anything off.

“Drink up,” Luca says, pulling me from my thoughts. He pushes himself off the counter, grabbing his tie-dye sweats from the floor. “I’ll drive you to get your car.”

We finish our coffee and get dressed, heading out into the cool December morning air so he can drive me to the gym.

And as we pull into the parking lot, Max is getting out of his car.

Luca smiles as he parks beside my car, watching as Max eyes us. “Oh, the scandal.”

I shake my head, unbuckling my seatbelt and reaching for the door handle.

“Wait.”

I turn to face Luca, and he has a mischievous look on his face. I assume Max is still out there and can see us, as it would be completely fair for him to be wondering what the fuck this is.

But I don’t look away from Luca to check.

The corner of his mouth tilts up and my heart pounds against my ribs.

As his lips meet mine, I once again let go, and just let it happen.

And it feels good.

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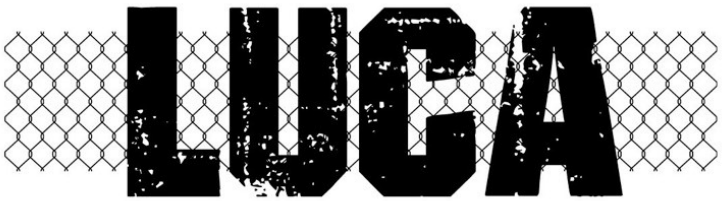
THIRTY-ONE



“MR. MITCHELL, Ethan threw his ball at me!”

Harper looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

“You are supposed to catch it! I had to throw it at you!” Ethan stares at Harper and then points at her, turning to me. “She didn’t catch it!”

“I couldn’t, you threw it too hard!” A tear runs down Harper’s cheek.

“Ok.” I take Harper’s hand and walk her over to Ethan, who is glaring at her. She holds onto my hand tight and leans against my arm.

“Ethan, can we try throwing the ball a little softer, so Harper has a chance to catch it?” I look down to Harper. She still has tears in her eyes, looking absolutely distraught over the situation. I crouch down to look her in the eye. “You know, we can’t always catch the ball, and that’s ok. Sometimes we miss, but then we have the chance to try again.”

She sniffles. “But it hit me.”

I nod. “Yeah, and that’s not fun. Are you ok?”

She nods, sniffling again.

“Good.” I smile at her. “You know what I do when I miss, or the ball hits me?”

“What?”

“Shake it off,” I sing and shimmy my shoulders, channeling my inner Taylor Swift. And I nailed it because Harper giggles and smiles. I smile back at her. “Your turn.”

She does an adorable little dance, singing, “Shake it off.”

“Amazing.” I smile and start to stand up, but she gives me a serious look, eyes roaming over my bruised face.

“Did you get hit by a ball too?”

Nodding slowly, I say, “Yeah…” and stand up. We’re not getting into *that* today.

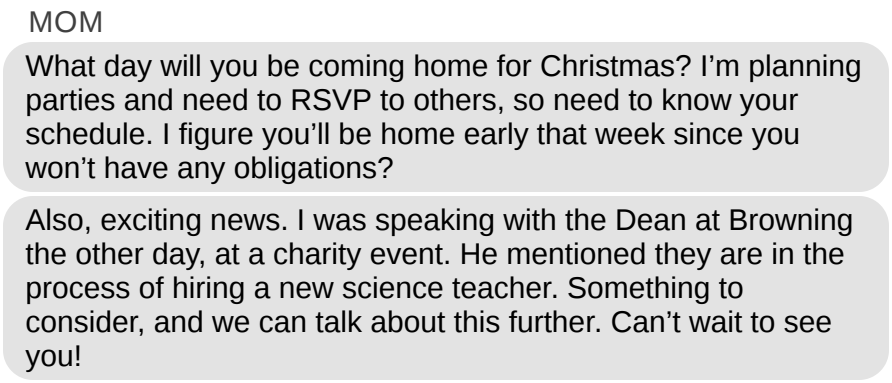
I help Ethan and Harper figure out their throwing and catching so everyone wins, and just as I’m about to move on to some other kids, my phone buzzes in my pocket.

And my heart rate spikes.

I try my hardest to ignore it, scolding myself for even having my phone on me. I never carry my phone when I’m teaching.

But today, I slid it in my pocket, and it stayed there. Along with a sneaky little hope.

And as I pull it out quickly to glance at the screen, I regret everything. It’s a text from Mom.


MOM
What day will you be coming home for Christmas? I’m planning parties and need to RSVP to others, so need to know your schedule. I figure you’ll be home early that week since you won’t have any obligations?
Also, exciting news. I was speaking with the Dean at Browning the other day, at a charity event. He mentioned they are in the process of hiring a new science teacher. Something to consider, and we can talk about this further. Can’t wait to see you!

Ah, of course. The Christmas parties where everyone dresses up in suits and gowns, complete with a stick up the ass. And yeah, obviously I wouldn’t have any obligations, as I am simply a gym teacher with a silly hobby. Naturally, I can just jump whenever they say so.

And fuck this never-ending crusade to get me to teach at Browning. It’s bad enough I had to go to that stuck up private school, like fucking hell I will ever teach there. And why my parents can’t even take a moment to actually learn what it is I do is beyond me. For being brilliant, high-profile doctors, they’re pretty fucking ignorant. I’m an elementary Phys. Ed. teacher and went through specialized training to be the best I can be at this job that I *love*. I can’t just suddenly move on to teach high school science.

With a sigh, I slide my phone back in my pocket, the feeling of disappointment taking over.

But I make it through the rest of the morning, doing exactly what I told Harper to do, and shake it off. I still have a couple weeks before I need to go home for Christmas and worry about all of that shit.

And not having any texts from someone else is nothing new.

As soon as I open the gym door to head to the staff room for lunch, I come face to face with Mary. Or Megan. Mary-Megan…

“Hey Luca,” she purrs, pretending to look surprised to see me… outside of the gym.

“Hey… you.” I really should pay attention to what her name is.

She giggles, probably thinking it was a flirty *hey you*. “So, I was thinking.” She tilts her head and smiles. “I’m going to come watch your hockey game this week. And we should go for a drink after.”

I nod slowly, glancing down the hallway, looking for an out. “Uh, sure, yeah, we’re all probably going to go out after. You’re free to join.”

Annoyance flickers in her gaze, but she quickly schools her expression, widening her smile. “Sounds fun. But I think just you and I should go out at some point too and get to know each other better. This weekend?”

My head is shaking before she even finishes speaking, and her brows draw together.

“Uh, sorry,” I wince, “I’m just… I… I’m involved with someone.”

Her eyebrows shoot up, and mine do too. I am? Where’d that come from… am I?? Oh wow, I have so many questions for myself.

“Oh, ok.” She backs up a step with a forced smile.

“But I’ll see you at the game.” I smile at her, not wanting to be a complete dick. She’s just flirting and putting herself out there. And even though it’s quite forceful, she’s not doing anything wrong.

“Hm.” She nods. “Yeah. See you.” She gives me an awkward wave and leaves.

I have some serious baking to do tonight.

As I run through my recipe list in my head, I make my way to Dan’s room. I’m thankful to find him still here, and his kids gone to lunch.

I close the door behind me as I enter, leaning against it and letting out a big sigh.

He looks up from his desk and laughs. “Hey, man. What’s up?”

“I have it bad.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “What?”

“I’ve been fucking someone and now I have feelings, and I think they’re big.”

Dan leans back in his chair. “Oh?”

I pull up a chair across from him and sigh. “And it gets worse.” I swallow hard as Dan observes me, waiting. “He’s my enemy.”

His eyes widen and he sits forward, resting his forearms on his desk. “Ok… I have a few questions.”

“Oh, yeah,” I wave a hand in the air, “I’m bi and I have an enemy.”

He nods. “Ok, questions answered. But, maybe just a couple more. Specifically, about the enemy?”

A forceful sigh escapes me as I slump in my chair. “Ok… I guess he’s not really my enemy anymore. But he used to be. I mean, I think he might still kind of hate me, and in a way I hate him too, but it’s *so* much more than that and things can evolve…” The look of confusion on his face brings me back to his question. “We fought against each other often, for years, back home. We topped the rankings, always taking number one from each other, and I *hated* him. And he hated me. Until we both came here to the same gym, and we have to work together, and we also fuck now. But… I started developing some feelings for him pretty early on, and now I *know* they are really there. Because of the moon and stars.”

He just nods again, slowly. “Hm.”

“I know.” I sigh again. “I don’t know what to do either.”

Dan chuckles. “And do you think he shares these feelings?”

“I *think* so… he at least hates me less now.”

“Ok.” He chuckles again. “And could you talk to him about this…?”

“We already did.” I point to my face.

His eyes widen. “Uh… ok…”

I nod. “It went really well, actually.”

His face twists in horror as his eyes roam over the cuts and bruises. “Alright. Well… maybe just… trust the process?”

God he’s smart.

“You’re right.” I nod. “So right. That is some solid advice, I’ll do that. Thanks, man.” I hold my fist out for him to bump, which he does with a laugh. “And I’ll bake tonight too, that will help.”

“Glad to hear it,” Dan says, standing from his desk. “Let’s go eat.”

“Let’s.” I stand as well. “So, beers after hockey this week?”

Dan smiles. “Absolutely. Hey, maybe you can bring your man.”

Well… now there’s an interesting idea.

Max looks up as I enter the gym, and I prepare myself for either a talking to or a round of applause after I kissed Ty in front of him this morning. But he just simply nods his greeting as usual and continues his way to his office.

Which leaves me feeling confused. Unless he didn't see us, but I swear he did.

As I head into the kitchen, my mind wanders to that kiss this morning. Ty was all in, and fuck, that was hot. I wonder if I can get another one out of him today…

"Hey, Luca," Noah greets me as I enter the kitchen. He's sitting at the table, drinking a coffee.

"Hey, bud." I smile, heading for the coffee pot and pouring myself one as well. "You been here long?"

"Nope, just got in about fifteen minutes ago," he says. "Figured I'd take a little coffee break before getting started."

"I like your thinking." I sit across from him, and Noah's gaze travels to the cut over my eye.

"So," he shifts uncomfortably in his seat, "I've been wanting to ask you about the tournament, but I don't want to-"

I cut him off with a wave of my hand. "Water under the road."

"Bridge?" he asks with a furrowed brow.

"Yeah, that too." I shrug. "It's all good. It's dealt with. And," I smile, "my scores showed a whole lot of guard passes so I'm happy with that."

Noah beams at me, holding his coffee cup up in a cheers motion. "That's the spirit."

I cheers him back, and we chat about the opponents we faced in the tournament, and what we're hoping to tackle next in training.

As everyone starts to trickle in, my eyes are flying to the door every time I hear voices or footsteps. Everyone joins us at the kitchen table as they arrive, while we take the time to catch up before getting started on training.

Eventually, I hear the front door to the gym close, and my heart does a little pitter-patter. There's only one person who hasn't arrived yet.

I make eye contact with Ty as he walks past the kitchen, and tilt my head in a gesture for him to come in.

He pauses, glancing around the table at everyone.

“Hey, Ty!” Elijah calls to him.

“Oh hey! Didn’t hear you come in.” Rosa smiles at him.

No one asks him to come in and join us, and I know that’s because they don’t want to put that pressure on him. Which makes my heart kind of happy in a weird way.

But also, fuck that. I’ll do it.

I pull out the chair beside me, keeping eye contact with him, and tap the seat.

He shoots daggers at me, and I can feel everyone watching us.

But I just cock an eyebrow, waiting for him to make his move.

And as Ty takes a hesitant step into the kitchen, I smile and bite my tongue on the many quips I could unleash on him right now.

He sits in the chair beside me, and Rosa places a cup of coffee in front of him. “Milk, sugar?”

“Black,” I say with a smirk, and take a drink of my coffee.

Rosa eyes me and then looks to Ty.

He picks up the mug, murmuring, “Yeah, black.”

“Ok, so what-” Adão starts, gesturing between us, but Max comes into the kitchen, cutting him off.

“Good, you’re all here.” He pulls out a chair and sits. “I have some news.” He smiles around at us as we all look back at him, waiting. “Legacy Fighting Alliance is having an event in Las Vegas in the spring. And I want you all to apply.”

Ty’s head whips towards Max and my jaw drops.

“Ohhh, fuck yeah.” Seb rubs his hands together. “Here we go!”

Max chuckles. “This is going to help you all gain the attention of UFC officials. And my hope is that if we can get you all in for this event, and it goes well, some of you may be in a position to apply for the UFC next year.”

“Fuck,” I mutter, staring at Max.

He nods with a light laugh. “Fuck indeed.”

My eyes slide to Ty, as everyone starts talking amongst themselves about how fucking *awesome* this is. Obviously, this was the plan in coming here, but now that it’s actually happening and we could be fighting in the

biggest developmental organization for MMA in the spring… well, *fuck.* This is real.

Ty turns his head from Max to look around the table, and then his eyes land on me. And they are full of excitement. I smile back at him, and his lips tilt up, ever so slightly.

"So," Max says, pulling our attention back to him, "you all have great records, but we need more wins to build your applications. You're all here because you have a distinct fighting style that grabbed my attention. Now, you need to showcase your fight to grab LFA's attention as well." He looks around at all of us. "I found you all a fight in January, in Nashville, to get started on this. So, you're all stepping up your training, starting today."

All of us agree, and the energy in the room is palpable.

Max goes around the table, telling everyone what he wants them to work on and discussing training plans. And as he does, my eyes travel to Ty once again.

He is listening intently to Max, laser focused and all business. I smirk, knowing his brain is probably close to exploding right now.

But he turns to meet my eyes, and once again I see the excitement. This rare glimpse into Ty's emotions, along with this exciting news, has me feeling fucking *giddy.*

"Ty and Luca…" Max says hesitantly, and we both bring our attention to him.

"What up Coach, where do you want us?" I ask.

Max sighs, looking between us. "Grappling is looking good, so…" he looks to Ty, "I would like to see more striking from you. Clean it up and add some speed."

Ty nods seriously, but Max still looks uneasy.

He glances at me, and back to Ty. "Will there be any problems with the two of you… doing that?"

I try to hide my smile but fail. Because the look on Max's face as he awkwardly glances between us tells me he did in fact see us this morning, and he's not quite sure how to navigate this.

I sling my arm around Ty's shoulder, and he tenses and glares at me.

"No problems here. Right, Tiger?" I ask, smirking at him.

He sighs and shakes his head, turning to look at Max. "No problems."

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THIRTY-TWO

"QUICKER, Ty. He's keeping you at the distance he wants."

To confirm exactly what Max said, Luca quickly steps backwards and lands a low kick right to my thigh.

"Fuck," I mutter, stepping forward and wishing I could just take him down to the ground to end this right here. My legs are taking a fucking beating, and he's really pissing me off.

I throw a left hook, but he rolls underneath it, steps to my right and throws a right uppercut to my body. I block that with my elbow, then block his hook to my head with my glove, but his uppercut down the middle lands on my chin.

I grunt, now fueled by rage and pissed at myself for not seeing that coming. I should have leaned or stepped back. Max is right, he is keeping me exactly where he wants me, and it's because he's too fucking fast.

"Stay low, pivot on some hooks," Max calls out.

I keep my guard up and do as he says, pivoting to the right when I land my next hook in a combo.

The grunt that escapes Luca urges me on and I unleash another punch combo, followed by a knee to his ribs.

But he blocks my knee and fucking *chuckles* before attacking me at the top with a double jab and right hook, leaving me unguarded low for two left kicks. And of course, because he's lightning fast and powerful with his kicks, I feel them.

I step back, taking a moment to collect myself and Luca smiles at me as he taps his gloves together.

That *fucking* smile. I hate it, so fucking much.

I step forward again, bringing in another combo and trying to move him onto his defense. As much as I despise a stand-up fight with Luca, I know I need him for this. Especially now.

I need LFA in the spring. This is a part of my plan to get to the UFC and be the best fighter I can be. Everything I have done so far has been working towards this, and I can't mess it up. I *will* be fighting in that event.

Which is why I need to round out my fight and tighten up my striking. My strength in grappling has taken me this far, but facing strong strikers like Luca has always been a greater challenge than I would like to admit. And my chances of facing these types of fighters is growing, so I need to target this. And Luca is the best to do that with.

But that fucking smile…

He bounces on his feet. "Let's go, Ty. Pound me."

Fine.

I step into him with a combo and land a left hook kick with force, causing him to falter in his step. I immediately control the distance between us and hit him with a body shot followed by an uppercut. He's finally on his defense, and I get his back up against the ropes.

"Faster, Ty. Harder," Luca says as he lays a jab-cross to my head.

I block his cross, but then he drops his arm for a body shot.

"Come on, fuck me up," he says in a goading tone.

I'm suddenly pushing him against the ropes, with my glove pressed against his throat under his chin. Luca starts to push back against me, but I hold him there.

"Guys," Max calls from the other side of the ring. "Come on. Let it go, back to sparring."

I stare into Luca's eyes, which are sparkling with mischief.

"You need to shut up," I say to him.

He smiles and raises his hand, spitting his mouthguard into his glove. "What's the fun in that?"

I start to step away from him so we can get back into it, and *I'll* shut him up, but he places a gloved hand on my hip to stop me.

"Remember what a tiger's punch can do?" Luca says, eyes flicking between mine.

I press his chin up slightly with my glove. "I do."

"One swipe of a paw… pretty deadly." He licks his lips. "Tigers make good strikers."

A small smile tugs at the corner of my lips as I stare back at him. I see Rosa and a couple of the guys out of the corner of my eye by the ring and hear Max's voice, but I tune it out as Luca closes the distance between us, our chests almost touching.

"But I think I need a reminder of how deadly a tiger's kiss is."

I swallow, my eyes dropping to his lips.

Luca's grip on my hip tightens, and the next thing I know I'm taking my mouthguard out and our lips are crashing together. My glove is still under his chin as I push him against the ropes again and take control, my tongue pushing past his lips and his hands pulling my hips into his. It's needy and messy, and apparently just what I needed, as some of the tension in my muscles slips away.

When I pull back from him, he smirks, and puts his mouthguard back in.

The corner of my lips twitch as I watch him.

Then I punch him in the face.

This car is fucked.

I stare up at the underside of it and wonder why the fuck anyone would even want to fix this. At this point, just buy a new one.

"Need some help?" Jake asks, coming to stand beside me and looking up at the car.

I sigh. "I'm still finding issues."

Jake huffs out a laugh as he reaches up to poke at the fraying serpentine belt. "This is a disaster."

"Tell me about it," I mutter, reaching for my wrench as I know I'm going to need to take the wheels off to get to whatever else is going on here. The owner brought the car in with a complaint of a "grinding noise" and so far I've found issues with the belt, transmission, alternator, aged spark plugs, and more. Guaranteed the brakes are worn out too.

"And they actually want to do this work?" Tim asks from his bay, lowering the car he just finished with.

“Yup,” I say, starting to remove one of the wheels. “He said do whatever needs to be done.”

“Shit.” Jake grabs a wrench and starts removing one of the other wheels.

I hesitate, about to tell him not to bother as I can do it.

But he then smiles at me. “Beats having to do yet another routine oil change though, eh?”

I chuckle, pulling the wheel off. “Got that right.”

We remove the other wheels, and just as I suspected, the brake pads are basically non-existent, and the rotors are all scored. Also, the tires are worn unevenly, so I think we’re dealing with misalignment and suspension issues too.

Tim comes into the garage after taking his car to the lot. He joins us and looks at the rotors with a low whistle. “Damn.”

“Yeah…” I say, trying to decide where to even start.

“Well, let’s start with the brakes and work our way inwards,” Tim says, heading to his bench to grab some tools.

I shake my head, looking between him and Jake. “It’s alright, you have your own work to do today. I can do this.”

Jake waves me off, having already started removing the bolts on one of the rotors. “It’s a slower day, we’ll get it all done. This is a shitshow. And honestly? I want to be a part of it.” He drops the bolts on the bench and smiles. “You don’t get a gem like this every day.”

I give him a small smile and awkwardly look between him and Tim. They really don’t need to be doing this, they do have their own work. And if they finish early, they could just leave. But they look genuinely happy to be doing this, and… I do appreciate the help. “Thanks,” I say.

We get started on replacing the rotors and brake pads, and with three of us doing it, it doesn’t take any time at all.

“So, how’s training going?” Tim asks me as he fills the brake fluid.

“Good.” I nod. “I have a fight in January.”

“Oh, sick,” Jake says, starting to drain the transmission fluid so we can move onto the next task. “Where?”

“Nashville.” I pull out the new transmission we’re going to install.

“Cool.” Jake smiles at me, and I feel bad that I’m being so vague. But I don’t know what else to say, and I always feel uncomfortable talking about myself.

But they don’t seem to mind, as Tim has more questions. “So, what exactly does training for MMA look like? Like, how do you prepare for these fights?”

“We train in each of the sports that make up MMA, breaking it down to focus on grappling, striking, ground fighting… along with strength and conditioning,” I say as I work on removing bolts from the old transmission in the car. “I’m a grappler, so I’m focusing on striking while training for this fight.”

“Ah, I see that.” Tim smirks at me.

It’s been a few days now since I acquired these injuries, so most of the bruises on my face are gone. But my lip is taking a bit longer to heal.

I huff out a light laugh. “This is actually from something else…”

Thankfully they don’t ask any more questions about that, and instead we keep talking about MMA. I tell them how we train in each sport and then bring them together to spar and fight, and they tell me about their experience watching it. I begin to feel more at ease talking to them while we work, and I find myself willingly sharing more with them.

And the fact they kept it all to MMA was a help. I know they did that for my benefit.

The car is done in a fraction of the time it would have taken me to do it myself, and as I lower it from the lift, I realize I actually enjoyed working on this with them.

“Thanks, guys,” I say to Tim and Jake as they head back to their bays.

“Anytime,” Tim says with a nod, and Jake smiles at me.

I take the car out to the lot, and the mile long work order into Bill at the front desk. The day is almost over now, and I think I have one, maybe two more simple jobs left.

My phone lights up with a text on my workbench, and my eyes slide to the screen.

Luca.

I stare down at it while I wipe my hands on my rag. We’ve been training intensely this week, and with the exception of a boxing ring make-out session, that’s all we’ve been doing. So, when I feel a bit of excitement creep in at seeing his name, I sit with it for a moment.

During the week he has made it known that he is going for a drink after hockey tonight. I’ve ignored him since I don’t care, but then he just pokes at

me about how I'll have to train without him, and that I'll apparently miss him.

Fucking Luca.

I pick up my phone and slide my thumb across the screen to read his text.

LUCA

Just a friendly lil reminder you'll be all alone tonight *crying face emoji*

I sigh and lock my screen. But before I can set it down, he texts again.

Unless you want a workout of a different kind later tonight…?

That excited feeling takes root again as I look down at his text, and tap out my reply.

Let me know when you're done.

Nope. You want this ass, you gotta come for a drink.

Those are my terms. Take it or leave it.

I sigh again, sitting down on a stool. Of course he can't just make this easy. I don't know his hockey buddies, it will just be awkward as fuck.

Tim laughs at something Jake said so I look up to see them joking around as Jake tosses a rag at him.

"Watch it, bud, or maybe I can get Ty to do some of that striking on *you*," Tim jokes as he smiles at me.

I chuckle as Jake holds up his hands in surrender.

I guess feeling uncomfortable doesn't always end up being a bad thing…

Where?

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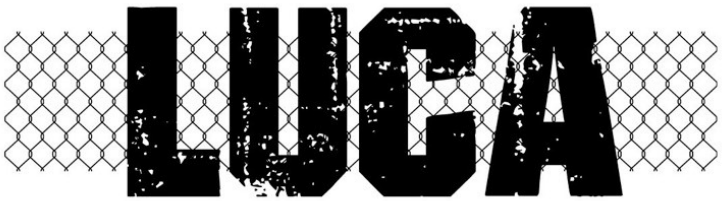
THIRTY-THREE



I SUBTLY TRY to check my watch while I take a drink of my beer, but Dan notices.

He chuckles. “You seem anxious.”

“No, I’m not,” I say, a little too quickly.

Dan smirks, leaning back in his chair. “Ok.”

I sigh, and glance around the bar. Some of the other guys from our hockey team are here as well, but they’re being rowdy at the bar. I see shots being poured and I shudder at the thought of downing those tonight. I don’t have any desire to go into work hungover tomorrow, so I’m glad Dan and I chose to sit away from them and take it easy.

That, and so I can allow someone else to ease their way into a social situation. I’m sweet like that.

Dan is still eyeing me, so I roll my eyes, and he laughs.

“Fine, ok, yeah. Ty is just a… well, he’s like this shy little baby bird that could kill you at any moment, so…” I shrug, “it’s just a little wild that he’s even coming here.”

His eyebrows raise, and he nods slightly. “That’s… interesting.”

I give him a serious nod and take another drink, trying to quiet down the questions floating around in my head. The ones asking if he will actually show up.

But no. I promised him my ass, so… he’ll be here. And if he doesn’t, well, I have some chocolate chips ready to roll.

And with that thought, he walks into the bar.

I watch him as his gaze slides over the space, until it lands on me. Then he walks over and pulls out a chair beside me at our table. He nods to me

and looks at Dan. “Hey.”

“Hi, I’m Dan.” Dan holds out a hand with a smile.

Ty reaches across the table to shake it. “Ty.”

He then glances at me awkwardly and shifts in his seat.

I can’t believe this is happening.

“So, Luca says you train together,” Dan says, crossing his arms on the table and smiling between me and Ty.

Ty just nods. “Yeah.”

Dan nods as well, glancing at me. “Cool.”

I don’t say anything, leaning back in my chair and waiting to see what happens.

“Um,” Ty shifts in his seat again, looking like he wants to crawl right out of his skin, “and you… work together…?”

Oh my god. Ty and small talk. I feel like I should record this.

I chuckle and nod, leaning forward so I can save him and keep him from bolting out of the bar. “Dan teaches grade two and is a sick forward on our hockey team.”

Ty nods, shifting his gaze between me and Dan. It’s obvious he has no idea how to do this, so clearly, I’ll have to help him out here.

But he’s saved from his next attempt at small talk, as the waitress appears at our table. “Can I get you a drink?” she asks Ty.

Before his mouth even opens, I jump in. “He’ll have an IPA.”

Ty shoots me a look and I smile.

“Coming up.” The waitress smiles and heads off to retrieve his beer.

He is still glaring at me, so I roll my eyes. “I know you were about to say no because of *training*, but come on, dude. It’s one night, just enjoy yourself.” I pause for a moment, staring back at him. “Tell me you really don’t want it.”

He sighs, breaking eye contact with me and shaking his head slightly.

Bingo. Knew it.

Dan chuckles. “So, Ty, how do you like St. Louis?”

“It’s good.” Ty nods. “Still getting used to a big city.”

“Yeah, I hear you.” Dan smiles. “I’m from outside the city so it took some time to adjust to the size and how busy everything is. The trick is finding some quiet spaces to go to when you need to get away from it all.”

“Like stargazing,” I say, smirking at him as I lift my beer to take a drink.

Ty's gaze slides to me, and I see a small twitch at the corner of his lips.

The waitress arrives and sets his beer in front of him, so I hold mine up for a cheers.

"To small town folk in big cities and tigers leaving their caves."

"Huh?" Dan glances between us, as Ty glares at me.

I motion for Ty to pick up his beer. "Oh, my bad. So, a cheers is when two or more people clink their glasses together in celebratory fun – you do remember what fun means? I think we went over this before – and then we-"

"Fuck you, Mitchell," Ty growls, picking up his beer and nodding towards Dan, then taking a drink.

I chuckle and clink my glass against Dan's as he just holds it in front of him, looking between us.

"Um," Dan shakes off whatever seems to be confusing him, and slaps on a smile. "Luca was telling me about the fight you guys have coming up. And the possibility of… LFA?" He looks to me and I nod. "That sounds awesome."

Ty visibly perks up a bit, now that the conversation has turned to something he can better relate to. But still, he's a man of few words.

"Yeah, looking forward to it."

"Jeez, Ty." I shake my head at him. "Can you let someone else get a word in? We get it, you're excited, but my god."

Ty's jaw ticks, and I laugh.

"Take your own advice, asshole," he says.

I scoff, waving him off. "Nah, you like my mouth too much."

"My fist does."

"Among other things."

"Fuck off."

"You first."

We hold eye contact for a moment longer, him glaring and me smiling, until we both turn back to Dan.

"So, yeah," I say, nodding at Dan, "we're both looking forward to getting back in the cage for an event. With some fights and the LFA application coming up, training is getting serious. Ty helped me a lot with grappling when I needed it, so we're shifting our focus to striking at the moment." I point to the healing cut over my eye. "Although, he does have a good one."

Dan looks between us with wide eyes, and just nods slowly. “Right…”

There’s a cheer from the bar, as apparently someone scored in the hockey game on TV I’m not paying any attention to. Ty turns to look at it, so I lean towards Dan.

“See?” I whisper. “*Feelings.”*

Dan presses his lips together and nods seriously. “Yeah. Sure, I can… see that…”

“Hey *you*,” a female voice purrs behind me and I freeze.

Oh, fuck right off.

I turn around to see Mary-Megan smiling at me, drink in her hand.

“Hey.” I force a smile, glancing at Ty who flicks his eyes to her, then back to the TV. “You made it after all,” I say with an unintentional flat tone.

“Yeah, I couldn’t pass up the opportunity.” She glances around the table to Ty and Dan, then back to me. “Where’s your girlfriend?”

Ty’s eyes fly to me, and I suppress a wince. “Oh,” I shake my head, “I don’t have one.”

Mary-Megan’s eyes light up. “Oh? I thought you were involved with someone?”

Ty’s eyebrows raise, ever so slightly.

Shit.

“No, uh, I mean, I’m-” I start, but Dan thankfully cuts me off.

“This is Ty, by the way,” he says, gesturing towards Ty.

She smiles at him. “Hi, I’m Isabelle.”

Oh. I was way off.

Ty nods at her and brings his eyes right back to me, staring at me with a stone-cold expression.

“You want to go get a drink, Luca?” Isabelle tilts her head towards the bar.

“I’m good, thanks.” I hold up my half full beer with a tight smile.

She giggles. “Well, next one’s on me.”

“Aw, that’s nice of you.” Dan smiles. “We weren’t sure if we’d do another round, but hey, if you’re buying.”

Ty smirks behind his beer glass as he takes a drink and I bite my lip on a smile.

“Uh, yeah. Of course.” Isabelle laughs it off. “So, are you working tomorrow?” she asks me. “We could go grab dinner after-”

She’s cut off by Ty reaching over to me, grabbing the back of my neck, and pulling my lips to his. He holds my neck tight, almost painfully so, but I let him.

When he pulls back, he keeps his lips close to mine. “Make her shut up.”

I nod, still staring at Ty and his hand still on the back of my neck. “Sorry, Isabelle. Can’t.”

“We should go.” Ty lets go of my neck, and I immediately stand up.

“Yup, sorry Dan, but we have to go.”

Dan chuckles and drains the last of his beer. “No worries. See you tomorrow.”

Well, this night was a success.

Apparently, Ty lives close to the bar. So when we get to his place, I pause in the doorway.

“Um,” I look around the space. “Where’s your stuff?”

He tosses his keys on the table. “What do you mean?”

I close the door behind me as I step into his apartment. “I mean… where is your stuff? There’s nothing here.”

Ty looks around the small apartment that has nothing but dated furniture. He just shrugs. “The place came furnished and all I need are clothes.”

“My god.” I shake my head, staring at the bland beige couch. “That’s sad.”

“Whatever,” Ty mumbles, taking his jacket off and tossing it over the chair.

I continue to stand in the middle of his tiny living room, staring at him.

“Now what?” Ty sighs.

“Tyler.” I swallow. “I’m going to say it.”

He sits on the boring couch. “Another deep confession?”

I nod slowly.

“Ok, then say it.” Ty looks up at me.

“Usually you would be telling me to shut up,” I point out.

“Ok, then shut up.”

“No, I want to say it.” I take in a breath. “And maybe you want me to say it? I don’t know.”

His brows draw together. “Well, I don’t know what to do here then…”

“Ok.” I nod, ready to just do this. “So, when Mar- Isabelle, said I was involved with someone, that just totally came out the other day when she was trying to get me to go out with her. I had no idea what it meant when I said it, and I just blurted it out because well… you met her.” I pause, and he just continues to stare back at me. “So, I don’t know, I mean, we’re fucking and I like that, but I also think it’s *more* than that, and…” I sigh, looking down at him. “It was the moon and stars.”

Ty doesn’t say anything, as he just keeps staring back at me, leaning forward with his elbows resting on his knees. Eventually he runs a hand through his hair and squints his eyes at me. “What?”

I tilt my head back. “Ugh.”

“What was the moon and stars?” Ty asks. His voice is softer now, and almost encouraging.

I lower my head to look at him again. He’s watching me cautiously, like he wants me to do or say something. Like maybe he knows what I really mean. Anticipation grows inside me, and the words come out.

“They showed me how I really feel.”

We’re both silent for a moment, and the anticipation turns to concern.

What if he doesn’t feel the same way.

What if this is only physical for him, and I’m about to get rejected.

I’m about to claw it all back in, when Ty stands up. He doesn’t step forward, or walk away, or do anything. Apprehension grows, while he just stands there, looking into my eyes.

“They showed me too.”

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THIRTY-FOUR

LUCA TAKES two large steps across the living room and presses his lips to mine. My hands automatically pull him into me, my lips parting for him.

We may not have said the actual words, but we know what this means. He's right. This is more than fucking, and when I heard he was involved with someone… I felt hope.

He pushes me down to sit on the couch and straddles me. As I push my tongue into his mouth again, I take everything I can get. His hands are running over my abs while mine cup his ass, and he grinds his cock against me through the fabric of our jeans.

We frantically strip each other of our shirts, then he drops his lips to my neck, saying, "Do you have lube?"

Disappointment settles as I turn my head to look at him. "No."

But he just smiles. "Well, good thing you love my mouth *so* much."

He reaches between us and undoes my belt buckle with expert speed.

"For *that*, yeah." I push his head down and he laughs, grabbing my pants and yanking them down with him.

As he settles on the floor between my legs, my pulse quickens. He holds my gaze as he wraps his lips around my hard cock, running a hand up my abs. And as he takes me deeper into his mouth, pleasure takes over.

"Fuck," I murmur as I run my hand up his arm.

He takes me all the way in, his lips sliding to the base of my cock and back up, pulling a moan from deep within my chest.

Then he pushes my knees wider, and presses a finger against my hole.

A warmth spreads through my body, but I glare down at him. He just smirks up at me and rubs the pad of his finger over my hole again. I try to

ignore the pleasurable feeling and think about how I can punish him for pushing his luck, but I can't.

It feels fucking good.

"Tell me you don't like it, Tiger," he says in a low voice. "Tell me you want me to stop."

He licks his finger and rubs it over me again. My eyes flutter closed…

And I keep my mouth shut.

When he pulls away from me again, my eyes open to see him staring up at me, sucking his finger. And now my pulse is thundering.

His eyes stay on mine as he lowers his hand, pushing his finger inside me and wrapping his other hand around my cock. My body initially resists this intrusion, but quickly gives way to satisfaction as he gently slides his finger all the way into my ass.

My head tilts back as my eyes close once again. "Fuck," I groan.

"Feels good, doesn't it…" Luca curls his finger and my entire body lights up. "Now imagine if this was my cock."

A breath escapes me as he continues to rub a spot inside my ass that has every nerve in my body singing in pleasure. His hand continues to stroke my cock, and the sensations are so overwhelming, I am at a loss for words.

I look down and see him watching his finger in my ass with a look of awe on his face. And I need more.

I grab his hair and pull his head down to my cock. He immediately takes me in his mouth, sucking me while he continues to stroke that perfect spot inside me.

And when he reaches his other hand down to undo his pants and slide it in, I'm about ready to fucking explode.

"Fuck, I'm going to come," I grunt, gripping his hair tight.

Luca groans, and the feeling around my cock sends me over the edge. A wave of warm tingles rolls through me, feeling like it will never end. And I don't want it to. The sight of him jerking himself off while he makes me come only urges me on more, and I unload in his mouth as he moans in appreciation.

When he releases me, he kicks off his pants and crawls up my body to straddle my hips again. He grabs my chin, tilts my head back, and spits my cum into my mouth. As I hungrily swallow it down, he spits the rest of it into my palm. And when his tongue pushes into my mouth, I lower my hand to rub my cum over his hard cock.

He moans into my mouth as I stroke his cum slicked cock, and as he rocks his hips into my hand, his ass is grinding against my dick. Soon enough, he's going to have me ready to go again.

Fuck… I wish I could fuck his ass.

"Oh my god," Luca groans against my lips as he thrusts into my hand.

My lips trail down his neck and chest, and his hand finds the back of my head, guiding it to his nipple. As I take it into my mouth, the groan that comes out of him is absolutely fucking feral.

I pull back to look into his eyes, which are glassy with pleasure. He looks like he is going to come at any second.

"Hm," I hum, slowing my strokes on his cock. "You like that?"

He nods with a swallow, rocking his hips again.

"You going to come for me if I do it again?"

He exhales with another nod. "Yes."

I pull his lips down to mine so I can kiss him, then whisper, "Good boy."

He grips my shoulders tight as I drop my mouth again, sucking his nipple and jerking him hard and fast.

"Oh fuck," he grunts, tightening his grip on my shoulders, his muscles tensing under my touch. "Fuck, yes, I'm going to come."

I push him onto his back on the couch, and take his cock into my mouth. His groans fill the room as he comes in my mouth, and I take a taste of him before pulling back to finish him with my hand. I watch him come on his abs, head tipped back and panting.

As he comes down from his high, I run my hand over his abs, spreading his cum over each of his nipples. He twitches with a grunt, followed by a guttural moan as I lick each one clean.

Then I bring my lips to his, giving him a taste, which he accepts with enthusiasm.

Eventually, Luca pushes me back and looks into my eyes with a serious expression. "That was hot as fuck." The corner of his lips twitch. "But… dude fucking 101. Always have lube."

Luca groans in displeasure as my alarm sounds. I roll over to turn it off, yanking my arm out from under him.

"Why?" he grumbles as he's jostled by the movement.

I lay back down, turning my head to look at him as he theatrically rubs his eyes.

He furrows his brow at me. "You're not much of a cuddler."

"And you are."

He nods. "The best." His eyes travel up and down my body. "We'll work on it."

I huff out a breath and get out of bed, pulling a pair of sweatpants on.

Luca watches me as he sits up. "Your bed is also not that comfortable."

I turn to face him with a sigh. "Anything else you want to complain about?"

"Hm." He looks around the room thoughtfully. "No, I think I covered it all."

"Oh, good," I say flatly, and leave the bedroom, heading into the bathroom.

When I come out, Luca is in the kitchen, wearing a pair of my sweatpants and poking at the coffee machine. And I think it's the first time I've seen him wearing something plain black with no color on it.

"How do you work this thing?" he asks, pressing all the buttons.

I bat his hand away, grabbing the coffee and filters. "Put coffee and water in and press brew. Like any other coffee machine."

"Ah." He nods and crosses his arms, watching me make it.

Once it's brewing, I turn to face him. He's quiet, and his eyes are soft as they peer into mine.

"Tigers are solitary creatures," he says. "They prefer to be alone, and often hunt alone at night."

It almost looks like he's waiting for something, cautiously asking a question and nervous about the answer.

My eyes drop to take in his muscled and tattooed torso. I nod slightly. "Yeah."

He starts to turn away from me, but I reach out and grab his arm. "But things change."

He smiles softly, and I step forward, bringing my lips to his.

We stay locked in a slow kiss while we're surrounded by the sounds and the smell of the coffee brewing. And when we separate, the cautious

question in his gaze is gone.

He squints his eyes at me, then slides them to my fridge. “I’m going to have to drink my coffee black, aren’t I?”

A small chuckle escapes me as I nod, and he looks horrified.

“My god.” He shakes his head. “Ok, from now on, we stay at my place. This is fucked.”

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THIRTY-FIVE

NOAH EASILY PASSES butterfly guard and keeps me from extending my hooks, using head pressure to put me flat on my back.

Fuck. For a little guy, he's fucking ruthless.

I manage to get off my back, gain control of his hips and sweep him.

Elijah and Adão cheer from the side of the mat and yell out encouragement as Noah moves to control my arm, and I anticipate he's setting up for an armbar.

"Yes, Noah, make him tap!" Adão yells, while Elijah calls out, "Move out, Ty!"

And Noah makes his first mistake, by not controlling my elbow. I quickly snap it out of his grasp as I shift my body, sweep my legs out to gain side control, and get him in an arm lock.

He taps, and I release him.

"Damn." Noah smiles as he sits up. "You're a beast."

"You are too." I stand, and Adão pats my back.

"Nice one," he says, holding out a hand to help Noah up. "You somehow know what we're all going to do before we even do it. That's a gift."

I shake my head as Elijah nods at me seriously. "It is," he whispers.

I chuckle, letting my eyes travel to the other side of the gym where Luca, Rosa and Seb are working with Max.

"So…" Adão brings my attention back to him, and he glances towards the others as well. "When are we going to get the story of what's going on here?"

"What's going on where?" I ask as I turn to grab my water bottle.

Elijah laughs. “Like we *didn’t* see you guys in the boxing ring?”

I shrug as I take a drink, and Noah smiles at me.

“All done?” Rosa asks as she approaches us with a grin. “Because we have plans.”

“We do?” Adão asks. “Do tell.”

Rosa nods. “I know it’s last minute, but I want everyone to come to my place tonight. A little Christmas get-together before some of us leave for the holidays. Max can’t as he is going to a party with his wife, but Luca and Seb are in.”

“Fuck yeah,” Elijah nods and smiles, “I’m in.”

“I’ll be there,” Adão says.

Noah smiles at Rosa with a nod, and I don’t miss the lingering eye contact.

Rosa turns to me. “Ty?” she asks hopefully.

I feel everyone’s eyes on me, and I glance over her shoulder to Luca across the gym. He is rolling up his hand wraps, watching.

The familiar feeling starts to rise. The one that tells me no, I can’t and shouldn’t do this. I’m only here to train and need to stay focused. Especially now that I’m creeping closer to achieving the next step in my plan.

But as I look into Luca’s eyes across the gym, I know that’s not true. I’ve been staying focused, while also letting myself experience something new, outside of the gym.

And it’s all been ok.

Rosa turns her head to see what I’m looking at, and when she turns back to me, she’s beaming.

I nod, as I take in her excitement and hope. “Ok.”

“Amazing!” Rosa steps forward like she’s going to hug me, and I can’t help it when I tense. She falters, and instead reaches out to squeeze my arm. “I’m happy you can come,” she says with a smile.

I give her a half smile back, feeling sorry for her. This is why I don’t do this… I have no idea how. I briefly question if I should back out and save everyone from the awkwardness.

But as everyone smiles and starts chatting about food and games to bring tonight, I realize that they don’t care. Even though I have been actively attempting to push these people away, they’ve remained patient and kept trying.

And I appreciate that.

“We’re going to blow everyone’s minds arriving together,” Luca says as we walk up to Rosa’s door.

“I think making out in the boxing ring did that already,” I mutter, shoving my hands in my pockets.

“Huh.” Luca stops in front of the door, nodding thoughtfully. “Yeah, probably.”

Luca knocks, and I back up a step. He immediately reaches out, pulling me forward again. As I jerk my arm out of his grasp with a scathing look sent his way, he just smirks at me.

And as much as that smirk pisses me off, I am somewhat thankful that we did come here together. Because I would have left by now.

The door opens, and Rosa looks between us with a mix of shock and excitement. “Hi!”

“Hey, girl.” Luca enters her apartment with ease, like he’s been here a thousand times.

I follow, hands still in my pockets and nod a greeting to her.

Seb is standing near the entryway, holding a mug, and squinting his eyes at us. “Ok, what?”

“What?” Luca asks him, shrugging his jacket off.

“I mean,” he gestures between me and Luca, “what?”

Luca looks at me, back to Seb, and then to everyone else in the living room as they watch. “We told you,” he shrugs, “we figured our shit out.”

Seb slides his gaze to me, and I just shrug as well.

Rosa appears before us with two mugs. “Here. Hot apple cider.” She smiles, shoving the cider into our hands.

Her place is all decorated for Christmas, with a little tree in the living room and Christmas music playing. Everyone is settled on the couch and the floor around the coffee table playing cards.

“We have a bunch of board games,” Rosa says, leading us into the room. “We just got the cards out. I wanted to play rummy but apparently we’re playing poker.” She rolls her eyes and sits on the couch between Noah and Elijah.

Luca and I sit, as he looks over the games on a shelf beside the couch.

“Oh, chess,” he says and shoots me a sly smile.

“You like chess, Ty?” Adão asks as he shuffles cards.

“Oh, he does.” Luca nods seriously before I can even answer. “More so as a warmup for the main event, though.”

I could fucking kill him.

I’m one second away from smacking that smug smile off his face, when Adão tosses cards in front of me as he deals them out.

“Well, I don’t know how to play chess, but maybe you could teach me,” he says to me with a smile and Luca bursts out laughing.

He’s pushing his fucking luck tonight.

“If I wasn’t a jealous man…” Luca chuckles as he picks up his cards and aims another annoying smile my way.

And I bite back my own.

Everyone is quiet for a moment as they look between us, trying to figure out what that means.

“Ok.” Adão nods. “Well… poker it is.”

We play a few rounds of poker, and then Rosa convinces us all to play rummy. I’ve never really played either, but it ends up being… fun. I find myself smiling and chuckling at Seb’s jokes and Elijah’s sarcasm, and talking with Adão about what training was like in Brazil. The feeling of being out of place and not belonging here slowly fades as I let go of the uneasiness, and trust myself to enjoy this, knowing there’s no trap to fall into. No dangers of past mistakes are lurking around the corner to punish me for having fun, and I don’t feel the urge to fall into old habits.

I’m safe here.

When everyone is talking about what game to play next, I head into the kitchen to set my empty mug in the sink. Then I duck out onto the small balcony just off the kitchen.

I take in a deep breath of the cold air and look out over the city. The quiet and stillness settles, as I let calm wash over me.

I can do this.

Just as I turn to head back inside, the door opens, and Luca pushes me back onto the balcony.

He holds up a mug of apple cider for me and sips his own. “This is fucking delicious. I think this is, like, my eighth.”

I take the mug, eyeing him as he closes the door behind him and leans against the railing, looking up at the stars.

My eyes stay on him for a moment longer, before I rest my elbows on the railing beside him, also looking up.

“I’m going home for Christmas next week,” he says.

I nod. “Figured.”

“I don’t want to.”

I turn my head to him, and he sighs.

“I want to see my sisters. But that’s it. My parents already have my time filled with parties, appearances and apparently, my mom is trying to set up an interview for a job at the school I went to.”

My heart lurches at that thought, and I grip my mug tighter. Even though I know he won’t do it.

“It’s fucked,” he murmurs, shaking his head as he looks out over the city.

“Can you just tell them no?” I ask, surprised by the sadness seeping out of him.

“I do.” He looks down into his mug. “They don’t listen.”

I nod slowly, letting my eyes travel over his arms full of random tattoos. “So you just do what you want.”

He turns his head to me and smiles. “So I just do what I want.”

I give him a soft smile back, and his eyes immediately drop to my lips.

When his eyes lift again, there’s some uncertainty in them. “Are… you going home?”

I shake my head, turning back to look down at the cars on the busy street below us. “No.”

We’re both silent for a bit, until I feel the urge to share more.

“My brother called.”

He turns to look at me.

“I didn’t answer.” I sigh. “I haven’t spoken to him in almost a year now. But he still tries to call every few months.”

“From prison?” he asks.

I nod. “Probably just wants money.”

“And… you have no idea where your parents are?”

I look at him, and his eyes are filled with so much concern. I’m not sure why. I’ve already told him this, and it’s not a big deal.

“I never met my dad, and I would assume my mom is high in a crack house somewhere.” I shrug. “I would think I’d be notified if she was dead, but who knows.”

“Jesus.” Luca’s eyes widen.

“She wasn’t much of a mom even when she was around. Honestly, I barely know her.” I look away from Luca, discomfort settling in at the thought of my family.

“Sorry to hear,” he says.

Loud laughs sound from inside, and suddenly the door whips open. Seb is standing there with a huge smile.

“Aw, cute.” He looks between us, almost like he’s waiting for something to happen. Then he gestures for us to come in. “Come on, we’re starting a new game. Ty’s on my team.” He then disappears, back inside the apartment.

Luca laughs and drains the last of his cider. “Well,” he says, turning to face me. “When families suck, you just have to find your own.”

The sound of everyone’s laughter inside burrows deep, stirring something I haven’t felt in a long time.

He turns towards the door, but stops. His eyes travel upwards to the moon, then down to me with a small smile. “Moon and stars, Tiger.”

I look into his eyes, and that feeling grows. “Moon and stars, Mitchell.”

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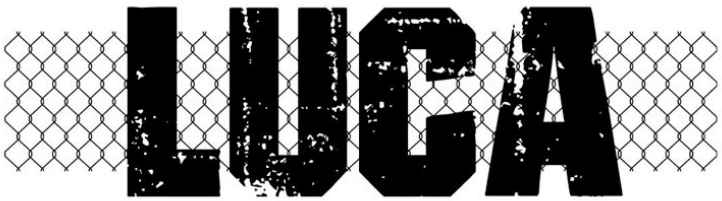
THIRTY-SIX



I TAKE a sip of my scotch and refrain from rolling my eyes as some guy named… John? James? Whatever, some guy with a J name talks about business growth and investments.

The woman beside me is nodding along, eager to hear this boring as fuck story. There's no reason to be so excited about this shit, unless she is hoping to jump his bones. But hey… maybe that would turn this snooze fest into a party.

I adjust my tie, looking out over the crowded room. It's fucking Christmas Eve, and my parents' house is filled with people I barely know. Apparently they're all "close family friends". Tell that to J-man, because he clearly isn't that close to us if he thinks I'm interested in *market expansion.*

I spot my little sister over by the food, so I excuse myself, letting the salivating woman step into my space, and hope that J-man gets some.

"Hey Nadz," I say, sliding up next to her as she picks at some kind of fish wrap cracker thing.

Nadia looks up at me with a smile. "Hey." She peers over her shoulder to where I came from. "Having fun?"

"A blast as always." I bat the fish thing out of her hand. "That looks gross."

She laughs. "Yeah. I wish we had actual food at these parties, rather than these weird bite-sized…" she trails off as she picks up something red wrapped in lettuce. "What do you think this is?"

I shake my head at it. "Don't know and don't really want to find out."

Nadia drops it onto a plate with a sigh and eyes the glass in my hand. "At least you can have that to help you through all this."

I chuckle, gesturing to the couch by the fireplace for us to sit. “Next year you’ll be able to.”

“Can’t wait,” Nadia mumbles, sitting on the couch beside me as I shrug my suit jacket off and roll up my sleeves to enjoy the toasty fire.

“Don’t have to,” Mia sits on her other side and shoves a glass into her hand. “If anyone asks, it’s punch.”

“Oh my god, I love you.” Nadia takes a sip and closes her eyes.

I narrow my eyes at Mia. I mean, sure, she also snuck me drinks when I was underage, as a big sister should, but… I’m torn about my feelings around this with protective big brother duties.

“I’ve been so busy working the past couple days, I haven’t had a chance to catch up.” Mia leans over Nadia. “How’s the boy situation?” she asks me in a low voice with a sly smile.

Nadia widens her eyes with excitement and turns her head to me. “There’s a boy situation?”

I smile between them. “Yeah. And it’s… good. We’ve made good progress.”

“Meaning?” Mia asks. “You’ve told us nothing.”

“Hm,” I nod, “yeah that’s on purpose. You’re nosy as fuck.”

Nadia snorts and takes another drink.

“No, I’m not.” Mia looks between Nadia and I with a shocked expression. “I just… want to make sure you’re ok…”

Now it’s my turn to snort. “Sure.”

“Ok, whatever.” Mia waves a hand, scooting closer and jostling Nadia on the couch. “Fine, I’m nosy. So, spill.”

I chuckle, taking a drink of my scotch to keep her on edge. When it looks like she’s going to explode, I laugh. “Alright, he’s a fighter at the gym, I’ve known him for years, we hated each other and now we don’t.”

Mia’s face breaks out in a huge smile. “Ty Roscoe?”

I nod. “The one and only.”

Nadia stares at me. “Damn. Never would have thought that.”

I let out a breath of amusement. “Me either, kid.”

“Well,” Nadia smiles, “I just might have my own boy situation.”

“Oh?” Mia turns to her with a smile. “Photo?”

Nadia takes out her phone and shows us a picture of the two of them.

“Oh my god.” I grab her phone to take a closer look. “Damn, girl. He’s hot.” I pass it back to her. “Tell. Me. *Everything*.”

“What are you all doing huddled over here?” Mom’s voice cuts through our fun.

I look up as she approaches, her eyes dropping to Nadia’s drink. She sighs and shakes her head, gesturing out to the party. “Go, mingle. Be social.”

Her eyes then land on me, and down to my arms. She reaches out, pulling my sleeves down over my tattoos. “Luca, Anthony is here. Be sure to speak with him soon before he leaves.”

“Who?” I ask, pulling my other arm away from her to roll my sleeve down myself. She’s never outright said it, but she hates my tattoos. Or, more likely, the impression they give.

“Anthony Harris, the Dean of Browning.” She gives me an exasperated look, like she’s told me this a thousand times.

I sigh. “Mom, I’m not moving back here to work at Browning. Also, I’m a Phys. Ed. teacher, not a science teacher.”

“Well, you can always teach gym at Browning. And it’s good to keep your options open too, no sense in pigeonholing yourself.” She eyes my suit jacket laying over the couch behind me. “At least hear him out and make an informed decision. And wear your jacket.”

She is then thankfully pulled away by someone.

I sigh, watching her leave.

“I already made my decision,” I mutter and take another drink.

“Don’t listen to her,” Mia says. “You’re doing what’s right for you, that’s all that matters. You know Mom and Dad, they like to overstep.”

“You’ll be back in St. Louis soon. Just say hi to the guy so Mom thinks you spoke to him and then it’ll be done.” Nadia shrugs, and I smile at her. So innocent… so much to learn.

“Thanks,” I say, standing up and pulling my suit jacket on. “I’ll see what I can do. No promises I won’t just get hammered and circle the perimeter, dodging my fate and praying for a miracle.”

“So fucking dramatic,” Mia mutters with a smile.

But I do just that, and duck behind a group of people at the far end of the living room. I stay hidden, far away from the Browning guy, who Mom not so subtly gestured to as I hurried past.

But now that I’m hidden, I pull out my phone. There’s someone else I used to hate talking to, but he’s been on my mind all night.

What are you up to? Something super fun? Is it watercolor this time?

My little heart dances as the three bubbles appear right away.

TY

Just finished a run.

Of course you're working out on Christmas Eve

Maybe now you can watercolor

What the fuck are you talking about?

Just trying to give you ideas of fun things to do. It worked out well last time. *star emoji*

Don't you have a fancy party to attend?

"Luca."

I look up from my phone to see my father standing before me, with a man and a woman on either side of him.

"You remember my old colleagues, Nancy and Henry?"

"Yes, hi." I smile, sliding my phone back in my pocket and shaking their hands.

"I haven't seen you in quite some time," Nancy says with a smile. "I remember when you used to come into your father's office as a little boy."

I chuckle. "Yeah, me too. I also remember getting in trouble there a lot."

Henry and Nancy laugh and my dad smiles, taking a drink of his scotch.

"So, your father was telling us you moved to St. Louis for work?" Henry asks. "What is it you are doing there?"

"Oh, I moved for-" I start, but Dad cuts me off.

"Luca is currently teaching out there, gaining some wonderful experience in a large school district." He smiles at me, and I try to keep my fake smile in place as well. "It will be helpful for him to build his network and skill set to work his way up in private schools."

"Oh, that's fantastic," Nancy says, turning to me. "You have that same determination and drive as your parents."

I give her a tight smile and decide to push my luck a little. Because this is really starting to piss me off. "I do. I'm very thankful I inherited their motivation and work ethic, as without it I definitely wouldn't have made the move to St. Louis to go after my real passion, which is MMA."

Henry furrows his brow. "MMA?"

I nod, sipping my scotch. “Mixed Martial Arts.” I take in the confused look on his and Nancy’s faces. “Cage fighting,” I offer, as a way to simplify things for them, and piss my dad off.

And it works, as he glares at me.

“Oh, wow.” Nancy literally clutches her pearls with wide eyes.

“Ah, I do remember hearing about you doing this now.” Henry smiles between me and Dad, who quickly slaps on a smile. “I heard you were quite good at it.”

“I was chosen by a professional fighter to come train with him, so I couldn’t pass up that opportunity,” I say. “I’m training for a fight-”

“Henry,” Dad cuts me off, pointing to Henry’s glass. “You need a refill. Come, we’ll top you both off, and I would love to hear about the renovations you have done at your beach house.”

He guides them towards the bar but turns back to me before leaving. “Enough of this. We are trying to help you, stop acting like a child. Now go talk to Anthony. Your mother has worked hard on setting up this opportunity for you.”

I sigh, watching him walk back into the party with his fake charisma and charm.

If I could walk right out that front door and never come back, I would. I am not meant for this shit.

I set my glass down, take out my phone and pull up my conversation with Ty.

Dad is right. Enough of this.

Party’s over.

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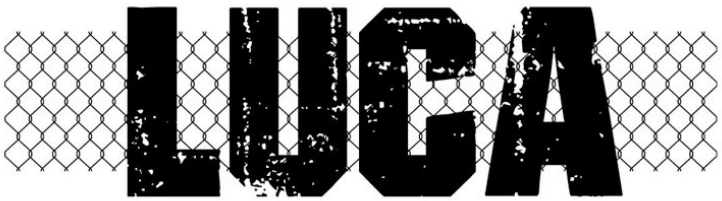
THIRTY-SEVEN



I PULL AT MY TIE, taking a deep breath as I knock on the door before me. A sense of both relief and anticipation falls over me as I hear footsteps approach on the other side.

When Ty opens his door, his expression changes from confusion to surprise.

"Hey," I say.

"Hi…" His eyes travel down my suit. "What are you…"

I push past him, into his apartment. "I came back."

"I see that." He closes the door and eyes me as I shrug my suit jacket off, tossing it on the couch.

"I couldn't do it anymore." I shake my head, pulling my tie off. "It was fucking awful. They were all like, don't do that, do this, pull your sleeves down," I say in a mocking tone. "Ugh."

Ty continues to stand there, both shock and confusion written all over his face.

I take in his comfortable sweatpants and t-shirt. "I could use some of those."

He gives me a slight, awkward nod before disappearing into his bedroom, returning a moment later with comfortable clothes for me. He remains quiet as he just watches me unbutton my shirt.

"What?" I ask. "Am I interrupting your fun watercolor or something?" I look around, but don't see any paints or easels anywhere.

Ty slowly shakes his head. "It's Christmas Eve."

"Yeah, and?"

"Why are you here?"

I undo the last button on my shirt and drop my hands with a sigh. “Why do you think?”

He doesn’t say anything, staring back at me with a look that almost seems… hopeful.

“Do you not want me here?” I ask, giving him a little smirk and bringing my hands to my belt buckle.

His eyes follow my movement, watching me as I undo my belt.

“That’s what I thought.” I step towards him. “I got you something.”

He looks up at me, and his brows draw together as I pull my shirt off. “You think you’re a fucking gift?”

“Hey.” I point my finger at him. “First of all, yes. Second of all, *I’m* not the gift. And third of all, it’s not necessarily a *gift*…”

He doesn’t look impressed, so I sigh, turning to show him my ribs.

His gaze drops, and I watch as his eyes roam over the stars I got tattooed around the moon. His expression doesn’t change, and a mixture of anxiety and annoyance settles within me.

“In case you haven’t noticed,” I say, keeping my eyes on him, “I tattoo just about everything on me without much thought.” There’s a bite to my tone, which wasn’t completely intentional, but he’s not giving me much to go off here.

His eyes meet mine, and I can’t read them.

Well, what the fuck.

“Whatever,” I grab the t-shirt, “when I like something I put it on me, it doesn’t mean anything, you don’t-”

“I got you something too.”

I pause with the t-shirt half on my arm, eyeing him. “What?”

He shrugs, his eyes dropping once again to the new tattoo. “But if it doesn’t mean anything, then…”

“Oh,” I drop the shirt, squinting my eyes at him, “fuck you.”

The corner of his lips tilt up slightly. “No, but I’ll fuck you.”

And my heart skips a beat.

I open my hands wide. “Well? Gift me then.”

“Which one?” he asks, putting his hands in his pockets.

“Oh, now you think you’re a gift?”

He rolls his eyes and walks over to a small table beside the couch, pulling open a drawer. When he turns around, he’s holding a pair of gym socks… with unicorns on them.

“Shut the fuck up.” My mouth drops open as I take in the gorgeous blue socks with magical unicorn heads all over them.

He holds them out to me, and I immediately push my suit pants down and remove my own socks so I can wear these *right fucking now*.

“I saw them and… thought of you,” Ty says, an edge of uncertainty to his voice.

I look into his eyes as I stand before him in my boxers and magic socks. “They’re absolute perfection. And I have a million questions for you.”

He huffs out a breath. “Figures.”

“But first.” My eyes drop to his dick. “I want my other gift.”

He smirks, and steps towards me. My hands slide around his waist as our lips meet, and we fall into a hot and desperate kiss. With each stroke of his tongue on mine, the tension I’ve carried over the past few days slips away, and I feel more like myself. Comfort settles, and it’s like this is right where I’m supposed to be.

Ty walks me backwards towards the bedroom, our lips still locked.

“Please tell me you have lube,” I murmur against his lips.

“I do.”

“Merry fucking Christmas to my ass.”

Ty pushes me onto the bed and pulls his sweatpants down, and his shirt over his head. I remove my boxers, and when he reaches for my socks, I jerk my foot away from him.

“Abso-fucking-lutely not.”

He blinks at me. “You’re going to wear these while I fuck you?”

I blink right back at him. “You think I’m *not* going to wear these while you fuck me?”

He silently stares down at me, like he can’t possibly fathom this idea.

“You gave them to me,” I point out. “You made your bed, now fucking lie in it.”

“For fuck’s sake,” he sighs. He gestures with his hand for me to roll over.

I do, even though my initial urge is to push back against his orders. But I know where this is going… he wants a sweet treat. And who am I to deny him this pleasure?

I push my ass back into him as his tongue glides over my hole, my entire body lighting up.

“Oh, fuck yeah,” I groan, my head dropping to the bed as pleasure consumes me.

He eats my ass like he’s fucking starving, and I take every bit of it. His tongue massages my hole, inside and out, and the warm, wet sensation sends tingles rolling through me. Each time I push back against him, asking for even more, he tightens his grip on my hips and gives it right back.

“Fuck.” I pull away and turn around to face him. “Jesus. You’re going to make me come.” I tug at his boxers, urging him up onto his knees. “Fuck my face.”

He immediately pushes himself up, his fingers winding through my hair. A thrill rushes through me as he pulls tight, and as the head of his cock meets my lips, I’m at his mercy.

Ty pushes into my mouth and I open for him, allowing him to go as deep as he can. He fucks my throat with the speed and urgency I crave. I push down the urge to fight him and take this back into my own hands, instead letting him use me. I look up at him as I taste his precum, and my cock is so hard it hurts. I reach down to stroke it in an attempt to relieve some pressure, but suddenly Ty pulls out of my throat and pushes me onto my back.

He narrows his eyes as he grabs my wrist and leans over me. “Mine.”

Sweet fucking Jesus.

He releases my wrist, bringing his hand down to my weeping cock. He runs his thumb over the tip, then brings it up to my nipple.

I groan, writhing under him as he lowers his head, licking my nipple clean. “Fuck… fuck me.”

He sucks my nipple again, and if he doesn’t get his cock in me soon, I’ll be finishing this party without him.

I watch as he reaches into a drawer in his bedside table and pulls out lube.

There’s about a thousand things I could say right now about him buying lube because I told him to, but I bite my tongue and count my lucky stars because *he bought lube.*

His lubed fingers swipe over my hole, and then his hand trails down my leg, lifting it so he can enter me.

But I feel his fingers hook under the edge of my sock.

I kick him. Hard.

“What the fuck?” He shoves my leg away from him, shooting me an angry look.

“Yeah, what the fuck indeed. I told you, they’re staying on.”

He sighs, forcefully grabbing my leg and pushing into me.

And all is forgotten.

Immediately, the head of his cock hits my prostate, and I am in fucking ecstasy. His powerful thrusts continue to stroke me, and I let him take complete control while his hand and eyes roam the stars and moon on my ribs.

“Fuck,” he mutters. “You do such a good job taking my cock up your tight ass.”

I groan deeply, my body moving on its own as I pull him down and push my tongue into his filthy mouth.

He fucks me hard as we pant and moan into each other, lips locked in a messy and heated kiss.

I reach down to grasp my cock, and he growls.

“What did I say?”

I smirk, gathering my precum onto my fingers, and reaching around him. As my fingers press against his hole, he grunts.

“Take me, Tiger.” I run my tongue up his neck. “Use me. Fuck me. Control me.”

He breathes out against my cheek as I continue to run my tongue along his ear and rub my slicked fingers over his hole.

“Make us come.”

Ty holds himself over me as he thrusts into my ass, hard and fast. I keep my fingers pressed to his ass, rubbing him as he gives my prostate the beating it’s fucking begging for.

“Fuck,” I grunt, “fuck, Ty. Yes, you’re going to make me come.”

He grunts in response, looking down to my cock as I come with a loud moan, and without a touch from either of us.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” he pants, and I feel his muscles contract.

His eyes close and his head drops as he thrusts into me hard one last time, and I press harder as I continue to rub my fingers over his ass.

“Oh my god.” He pushes his forehead into my shoulder, slowly moving his cock in and out of me as he comes.

Then he pulls out, reaching a hand down to my ass. He rubs his cum over my cock and my muscles twitch at the overwhelming feeling. Which is

only amplified as he pushes himself down my body, taking my sensitive dick into his mouth.

When he crawls back up my body to share this taste with me, I pull him against me tight. I let my senses take him in, consuming every part of Tyler fucking Roscoe.

When he pulls back, I look into his eyes, ready to get serious.

“Now,” I sigh. “About these socks. For my first question, I want to know your exact thoughts and feelings when you first saw them.”

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THIRTY-EIGHT

LUCA IS asleep with one leg draped over mine and his arm dramatically thrown over his eyes. I've been awake for a bit now, but I haven't moved.

I count the stars around his moon tattoo for the tenth time, unable to take my eyes off it. And as I count the stars for the eleventh time, I also reach out and trace them with my finger.

Luca stirs, peering out from under his arm.

"I like it," I say, circling the moon.

He drops his arm from his eyes and smiles. "Me too."

I pull my hand away but keep my eyes on it.

"What?" Luca asks.

"Nothing," I say with a slight shake of my head.

"It's something."

A moment passes before I look up at him. "The stars mean that much to you?"

His brow furrows slightly, and I bite the inside of my cheek.

That isn't what I meant.

But I can't bring myself to say the words I want to.

Do I mean that much to you?

Luca searches my eyes for a moment before his gaze softens, and he nods. "It's why I came here."

A small smile tugs at my lips as I look into his hazel eyes. "Moon and stars…"

He smiles, pulling his leg off mine so he can roll onto his side to face me. "Moon and stars."

I sigh, lifting the covers to look down at his feet. “You slept with your fucking socks on?”

“Fuck yeah I did,” he says proudly.

“Weird.” I look up at the ceiling, ignoring him as he happily rubs his feet together. “So… does your family know where you are?”

“My sisters do.” He rolls onto his back. “My parents don’t. And I turned my phone off, so they’ll be *pissed*.”

I turn my head to look at him and he just shrugs. “They’ll get over it. I’m used to letting them down.”

But I see the hurt.

He keeps his eyes on the ceiling, so I gently nudge his arm. He rolls his head to the side, meeting my eyes once again.

“Thanks for coming.”

Luca smiles with a slight nod. “Thanks for making me come.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, turning away from him again.

“Yeah, that’s right. Merry fucking Christmas, by the way.” He sits up, looking down at me, beaming. “What were you going to do today?”

I shrug. “No real plans. Adão and Seb texted yesterday about doing something, since they also didn’t go home.”

Luca gasps so suddenly that I jump.

“What?” I sit up, confused and worried.

He stares back at me. “Oh my god. You… made plans… with friends? The *growth* Tyler. The *growth*!”

“Fuck off.” I rub a hand over my face. “And there’s no *plans* in place, they just asked if I wanted to go to Seb’s.”

“And you said yes?” he asks excitedly, reaching out to pull my hand off my face.

I smack his hand away. “God you’re fucking annoying.”

Luca smiles. “Well, we’re going.”

I nod slowly, looking away from him.

“What now?”

“I was going to go to the gym too,” I say with a sigh.

“Of *course* you fucking were.”

I turn back to him, waiting for the quips and jokes.

But he just nods.

“Fine.” He throws the covers back and stands up. He’s naked, except for the unicorn socks. “I’ll go to the gym with you if you suck my dick in the

shower while I drink coffee. Then we're going to Seb's."

He doesn't give me an opportunity to answer, as he turns and leaves the room.

The sound of the shower starting up mixes with his voice yelling back to me, "You start the coffee, I'll get myself warmed up!"

"So, when it says half a cup…" Seb squints at the recipe and then looks up at Luca as he effortlessly measures out half a cup of sugar.

"It means half a cup, Seb," Luca glances over his shoulder at him, and Seb just shrugs.

"Oh, cool."

Adão chuckles beside me as we sit on the stools at the kitchen counter, watching Luca teach Seb how to bake cookies.

"So, Luca, where did you learn to bake so well?" Adão asks.

"Stress," Luca answers easily.

"Huh?" Seb looks up from his recipe.

Luca nods. "Stress baking, it's a thing. Great coping strategy, *and* you get to learn a valuable skill."

Adão nods slowly. "Alright then."

I take a drink of my beer and watch as Luca mixes up icing in a bowl. My mind wanders to the last time he went on a baking bender, and the reason for it.

How far we've come…

He dips a finger into the bowl of white icing, bringing it up to his lips. My eyes follow, as his stay on me. I'm vaguely aware of Seb chattering away about measuring cups as Luca's tongue comes out and slowly licks the icing from his finger.

"What's happening here?" Seb pulls my attention away, as he looks between me and Luca.

"Oh, nothing, Seb. Was just about to offer Ty some icing." Luca dips another finger in the icing and holds it out to me. "Unless you're all full up on icing from this morning?"

Adão and Seb both quietly watch us as I glare at Luca, and he just laughs. He then licks it off himself, and I adjust in my seat as, yeah… that's fucking hot.

Luca thankfully sets the icing aside and turns to Seb. "We need a rolling pin."

He nods seriously and glances around his kitchen. "Yeah. What's that?"

"Oh my god," Luca mutters. "Really?"

Adão tips his head back on a laugh as Seb shrugs. "I've never baked before!"

I chuckle as I watch them search the kitchen for something to use, and the best thing they can find is a beer bottle.

"Ok," Luca sighs as he sets the beer bottle beside the dough. "Dare I ask if you have cookie cutters?"

Seb shakes his head. "Probably shouldn't."

"Oh my god!" Luca throws his hands in the air. "*You* wanted to bake cookies!"

"*I've never baked before!"* Seb opens his hands wide, looking overwhelmed.

A laugh bubbles out of me as I take in their exasperation. Luca settles on a knife to cut out their cookies, and after a long and difficult process of rolling the dough out with a beer bottle, they're hunched over the dough with their knives.

Adão furrows his brow at Seb as he proudly cuts out a shape that doesn't look like anything.

"It's a tree," he says, matter-of-factly.

"Hm," Adão nods and turns to me with a wince, pulling a chuckle from me.

"So, when do you guys think you'll get back into the gym?" Seb asks as he leans over his dough to cut out another cookie.

I shrug. "I haven't stopped."

Luca huffs and rolls his eyes. "Yeah, we had to go this morning, can you believe it? Not even one day off."

Seb looks up from his cookies and glances between us. "You went this morning?" A small smile forms on his lips. "Like… this *morning*?"

Adão ignores him and gives me a smile. "What did you work on?"

"Just went for a run and did some weights," I say.

Luca snorts. "Just."

“Oh, fuck off.” I shoot him a glare. “You got what you wanted.”

He nods. “Yeah, I did. A little dick sucking in the morning really is a good motivator.”

Seb whips his head up. “Ok, what the fuck!”

“So I guess we’ll be good to go after our long and well-deserved *break*.” Luca shakes his head, leaning over the counter again to continue working on his cookies.

“You’ll be thankful for it when it comes time to get back to heavy work,” I say, and take a drink of my beer.

He looks up at me through his messy curls hanging over his forehead and gives me a little smirk.

I give one back to him and catch Seb out of the corner of my eye, still looking confused. Adão just smiles, and we bring our attention back to baking.

Seb tries to make a pair of boxing gloves, but after baking them it just looks like a dick with huge balls. And when Luca dunks it in the icing and tries to shove it in my mouth, he earns a semi-unintentional throat punch from me.

But overall, it’s probably the best Christmas I’ve ever had.

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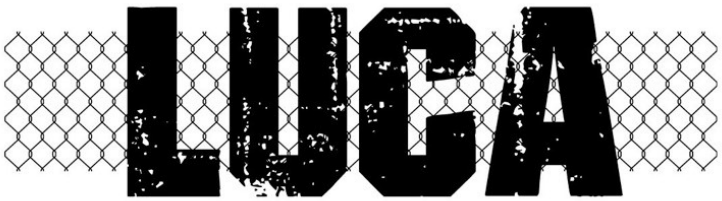
THIRTY-NINE



I'M WATCHING Ty's ass flex perfectly with each step he takes in his black fight shorts, when he suddenly stops outside the locker room.

I look up just before I run into said perfect ass, to see Max standing there, blocking our way into the gym.

He glances between us. "Can I talk to you two?"

"Sure," I say slowly, glancing at Ty. But he doesn't look at me. His jaw is tight and he's unreadable as we follow Max into his office.

Max closes the door, gesturing to two chairs for us to sit. He then perches himself on the edge of his desk, crossing his arms.

Fuck.

Is he kicking us out?

"So," Max says, looking between us, "I just wanted to check in…" He looks uneasy, like he's not sure what to say or do.

And now I know why we're here.

I lean forward with a smile. "About?"

Ty glances at me nervously.

"Alright, I'm just going to ask." Max uncrosses his arms and places his palms on the desk on either side of him. "What's going on here? Are you… together?"

Oof. Ok, well that's a loaded question.

I turn to Ty and see his fingers fidget on his lap. There are some feels at play here… I mean, I tattooed his stars on me, but… are we *together*? As I watch him fidget, I feel a little hope rise. Because he's not jumping at the chance to say no.

And when he gives me a little nod, I light the fuck up.

I turn back to Max with a big smile. “Yup.”

He must not have been expecting that answer, as his expression morphs into one of shock. “How the fuck did that happen?” His head whips between us several times, like he’s waiting for us to yell *psyche!*

“It was the tension.” I nod seriously. “Hatred often walks in disguise…”

Ty snorts and shakes his head. “The hatred was real.”

“*Was.*” I point out, then tilt my head with a smile. “Aw. Tyler. You expressed a feeling. Congratulations.”

He glares at me. “Hatred may still be real.”

“Oh please,” I scoff. “Tell me that when you’re balls deep in my-”

“Ok.” Max holds his hands up. “I don’t need any more details.” He rubs a hand over his face. “Jesus, when you first got here, I was worried about you training together because I thought you’d kill each other. Now… I guess, considering,” he gestures between us, “this, and training…”

“Are you asking if I’ll still punch him in the face?” I ask. “Because I will.”

Ty shoots me a look. “Yeah, no problems going all out on this fucker.”

Max lets out a breath of amusement. “Ok… but training only. No brawling.”

“Fine,” I mutter, slumping in my seat.

Max chuckles and crosses his arms over his chest again. “Well, I’m happy for you guys.” He gives us one more little shake of his head with a smirk, his disbelief lingering. “And I’m glad to hear training won’t be affected, as we’ve heard who you’re fighting next weekend. And Ty, you’ve got a nasty striker.”

Ty perks up and leans forward. I keep my eyes on him a moment longer to take in his excitement.

“He’s out of Nashville,” Max says. “He has a decent record, but he’s fucking ruthless and has had a few strikes against him. In my opinion, he’s an impulsive idiot. But that could work in your favor.”

Ty nods seriously, and he looks like he’s ready to get in the cage with him right now.

“His name is Josh Hens,” Max continues. “Look him up and study him. He’ll keep you guessing and is going to try to keep you on your feet, so you’ll need to be quick. Everything you’ve been working on with Luca, ramp it up.”

“Ok.” Ty nods again.

“Del is here today, so go do some footwork drills with him. And I want to see you on the bag and sparring with Luca this week. We’re also going to do some sparring in the cage.”

“Sick.” I turn to Ty with a smile. “I can be nasty too, you know.”

Before Ty can respond, Max turns his attention to me.

“And Luca.”

I lock my dirty jokes away for later and turn to Max. “Yes boss?”

“You have Brad Eastin. He’s a fairly well-rounded fighter. Equally skilled in all areas, but not really strong in one. Which could go either way for you. He could be an easy fight, or he could really challenge you. So, look for his weakness. Since you’re a striker, he will likely want you on the ground. Keep rolling with Ty, and drill passes and sweeps.”

“Gotcha.” I give him a nod and feel the excitement stirring.

“Ok,” Max pushes himself up from the edge of his desk. “That’s it. Ty, go see Del. Luca, grab Elijah and roll with him today.”

As we leave Max’s office, Ty immediately zeroes in on Del at the boxing ring. I can *feel* the anticipation in him, as he transitions right into work mode.

“Aw. Cute.” I poke him and he jerks away from me.

There’s that glare I’ve grown to like so much.

I laugh. “Calm down. I’m excited too, can’t you tell?” I smile widely at him, and he just rolls his eyes and starts to walk away.

“Hey,” I call out and he stops, turning around to face me. I take a moment to look into his dark eyes. “It will be nice to have you in my corner for this one.”

The corner of his lips tilt up, and I smile back at him. “Also, did you know that tigers can run at a speed of up to 65 kilometers per hour?”

He furrows his brow. “What?”

I nod. “Yeah. So… tigers are fast.”

He breathes out a light laugh and shakes his head, turning towards the boxing ring again. “Deadly and fast. Good combo.”

I smile at he heads off to work. “You know it.”

“Get his arm!” I call to Elijah as Noah quickly sweeps him.

“Yes!” Rosa jumps beside me. “Get it!”

Noah manages to pull Elijah into a rear naked choke, and he taps.

Elijah stands, shaking it off. “Damn.”

“You need to control that arm,” Max says to him. “Then you could have moved into side-control and even into an armbar.”

“Yeah,” Elijah sighs, rubbing his face. “Ok,” he turns back to Noah, “again.”

I watch as they get back into their drill. And my eyes travel to someone I wish *I* was drilling…

Ty is at the MMA bag, working through some drills of his own. We’ve had a solid week of training since we found out who our opponents will be, and his focus hasn’t let up at all. As he lays a *lethal* high kick on the bag, I smile. He’s got this.

An elbow digs into my ribs, and I look down to Rosa’s smiling face.

“Adorable,” she says.

“Shut up,” I murmur through a smile, glancing one more time to Ty.

“No,” she says simply. “I will not.”

“Fine,” I turn to her and gesture to the mat. “Time to work then.”

She nods and happily drops to the mat.

Max turns to us. “Double under pass,” he says.

“Got it.” I drop to my knees, allowing Rosa to wrap her legs around my waist for closed guard.

And she kicks my fucking ass.

I manage to open the closed guard, but she creates space by moving her hips back as soon as I reach under her legs, anchoring her body to the mat. But I use our size difference to my advantage, quickly closing this distance, and getting the grip I want over her hips.

Except I fell right into her trap. She weaves one leg behind my arm and over my legs, placing her other foot on my hip and locking my shoulder.

Fucking ouch.

“Fuck.” I tap, and she lets go with a smile.

“Luca.” She shakes her head slowly. “Don’t hold back on my account.”

I rub my shoulder and snort. “Girl. You’re a menace.”

She smiles innocently and I laugh.

“Alright, let’s go again,” I say.

We drill the double under pass for a bit, and some other passes from various guards, until I'm done getting my ass handed to me.

"Damn, Rosa." I stand up. "I think I need a hug."

"It's ok, Luca. You got a couple passes." She pats my back with a laugh.

I give her a little shove with a chuckle, and the sounds of the MMA bag fill my ears.

He's still working.

Nah. Enough of that.

"We done?" I ask Rosa, and she nods, shooting a worried glance Ty's way.

I walk over to Ty and stand beside the bag, crossing my arms.

He doesn't even acknowledge me.

I can't help the eye roll as I step closer. "I think you got it."

His foot comes dangerously close to my shoulder as he kicks the bag, continuing with his drills.

"Ty," I say, eyeing him. He might as well be in a trance, he is so focused.

But he emerges.

"I'm not done," he grunts as he punches the bag in a deadly jab, body, hook combination.

I sigh. "Take a break."

"No."

"Dude, you trying to set a fucking record or something?"

"Shut up."

"Make me."

He suddenly turns, landing a punch to my stomach.

I double over with an *oof* and feel all eyes on us.

"Not quite what I meant," I wheeze as I straighten up and hold back on returning the gesture.

But when I look into his eyes, I'm met with uncertainty.

"I need this," Ty says quietly.

I nod. "I know."

He doesn't look away from me, and I can almost sense some sort of pleading in him. We have one week until the fights, and the closer we get, the more rigid he becomes.

I gesture with my head to the boxing ring. "I could probably use a spar."

His eyes soften, an eagerness entering his gaze, and he nods.

But as he takes a step towards the ring, I place a hand on his chest to stop him. “You have to pay the toll first.”

His eyes dart behind me, and as it’s dead quiet in here, I assume everyone is watching.

He hesitates for a moment, but it doesn’t stop him.

His gloved hand moves behind my head, and his lips crash into mine. I grip his sweaty skin, pulling him close to me and taking everything I can from him. Hands and gloves roam as we stay in a filthy kiss, ignoring everything around us. I feel the tension in him, and it creates an urgency in me as well.

Eventually we pull away from each other, and I wipe my mouth with the back of my hand, smirking at him.

He taps his gloves together with a slight smile, and heads to the ring.

As I turn to grab my gloves from the locker, I catch sight of everyone staring at us.

Rosa smiles and clasps her hands under her chin. “I just love this so much.”

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FORTY

"THEN I'D DO THIS." Luca bounces on his toes as he shadowboxes the air in front of me.

"Be fucking serious." I smack his hand away from my face. We're just days away from the fight now, and I'm ready to get some fucking work done here.

"I'm with Ty on this one," Max says from the side of the cage. "It may be light sparring, but we have work to do."

Luca opens his hands wide in exasperation. "I am being serious! I'm channeling my best Josh Hannah."

"Josh Hens," I correct him.

"Same thing." He shrugs.

"Ok, let's go. And guys," Max brings our attention to him, "*no* hard strikes. *Light* sparring."

We both agree, tap our gloves, and get started.

And it's fucking hard.

Not because I want to hit him. I mean, I do, because he's being extra annoying as he *channels his best Josh Hens* by dancing around me and laying cheap shots.

I shouldn't have let him watch his fight videos with me…

It's hard because, as always, the week leading up to a fight is the worst part of it all. I can't train with the intensity and duration I need to stay in my routine and remain focused. With the fight in just a couple days, I've tapered my workouts to light cardio and shadowboxing, and it isn't enough.

Yet, as I look into the eyes of my sparring partner, a new realization hits me. It's actually been easier this time.

“Good, Ty, stay ahead,” Max calls to me as I position myself just in time to block Luca’s kick with my forearms.

Luca challenges me, as usual, with his speed. And even though this is a light spar, it feels different than any other time we’ve been in the cage together. I feel confident in the skills I’ve gained and fine-tuned since coming here and working with Max… and Luca.

We spar without hate, and with a focus on fine tuning techniques and supporting each other. And even though it’s an odd feeling to know this preparation isn’t leading up to a fight against him… I’m thankful for that.

As I get Luca to the ground, I am also recognizing how much more controlled and calculated he is. He keeps me on my defense for a while, and I’m surprised by how much has changed for us.

Both in and out of the cage.

But eventually, I get him into an armbar, and he taps.

He pushes up onto his knees, and I expect to see anger in his eyes. But he just smiles. “You and your fucking armbars.”

I huff out a light laugh and get to my feet.

“Good, guys.” Max says and opens the cage door. “All done for today. Go home, rest up.”

“Looking good,” Adão says with a smile as we exit the cage. “I see some wins in our futures.”

“Fucking right.” Luca beams between us as we head into the locker room.

Everyone is trickling in after completing their workouts, wrapping up early as we leave in the morning for Nashville.

“So, have we decided who is driving tomorrow?” Rosa asks, looking around at all of us.

I head to my locker and open it, knowing Luca has already figured this whole thing out.

“I am,” he says. “I can take three people.

“Cool, I’ll drive too,” Noah says. “I can fit four.”

“I call Luca’s car.” Seb raises a hand in the air. “He has good music.”

I snort as I grab a towel from the shelf, and Luca turns on me.

“Oh, don’t you start.” He points a finger at me. “You were totally grooving to the Spice Girls the other day.”

“I can guarantee you I was not.” I shake my head and push past him towards the showers.

“Bullshit!” he calls after me. “We’ll put it on again tomorrow!”

I ignore him as I walk away, but can’t help a small chuckle as I hear him singing about spicing something up.

Just as I’m about to close the door to the shower stall, a hand grabs it.

Luca slides in with a smile, closing the door behind him and locking it. “Hey there, Tiger. You didn’t think you were going to get naked without me, did you?”

I draw my brows together as I look around the small shower. “Yeah. I did.”

The sounds of chatter and laughter wafts in from the other room, and someone turns on the shower in the stall across from us.

Luca smiles, and reaches behind me, turning the shower on.

“They’re going to know you’re in here,” I say in a low voice, almost a whisper.

He scoffs and waves his hand in the air. “Yeah, showering. Which is what I’m doing.”

He nods down to my shorts with a small smile. And the flutter of excitement I feel at that look has my hands pushing them down my hips. Once they’re off, he pushes me back into the stream of water, and steps out of his shorts. Immediately, my eyes travel down his body, and when they make it back up to his face, he has a dangerous smirk in place. He steps forward to join me under the warm water, bringing his hand to my dick. The flutter grows as he wraps his fingers around me and slowly strokes. Warmth spreads through me, my senses ignite, and I let go.

Luca steps even closer, bringing his lips to my neck and running them up to my ear. “So hard for me already.”

I capture his mouth with mine as I let him push me back against the shower wall. His tongue slides against mine as his hand strokes my hard cock, and mine grab his ass.

But as I reach for his cock, he bats my hand away.

I pull back from his lips, narrowing my eyes at him. The sound of one of the other showers starts up, and Luca smiles with excitement.

His free hand lifts to grasp my jaw, tilting my head back to expose my neck. His other hand is still working me, and with each stroke, the pressure builds.

And I once again forget everything, giving my control up to him as his tongue runs up my neck.

I suppress a moan, trying to be quiet as he pushes all the right buttons.

“Shh.” He pushes his hips against mine, and wraps his hand around both our cocks.

I exhale forcefully, dropping my head to take in the sight. His hand moves slowly as he grips us both, jerking us at the same time.

Seb and Elijah’s voices sound from within the bathroom, but I can’t make out what they’re saying. And I don’t care.

My hips rock into him as my hands trail down his back. And as his speed on us increases, my grip on him tightens.

In my attempt to keep quiet, I dig my nails into his skin, and he grunts. But as he jerks us faster and leans into me more, I smirk into his neck. That was a grunt of pleasure.

I drag my nails down his back and feel him tremble.

“Fuck,” he breathes against my ear.

The shower across from us turns off, and the room becomes quieter.

Luca grasps the side of my head with his free hand, pressing his lips right up to my ear. “Better come, they’ll be wondering where we are.”

I grab his hair and yank his head back. “Make me, then.”

Our lips crash together in a heated kiss as he furiously pumps our cocks, and my fingers once again dig into his back. The pressure builds and overflows, as electricity shoots up my spine. As Luca’s head drops to my shoulder and he bites my neck, I look down to see him come with me, our cum mixing together as it runs down his hand.

A heavy breath leaves my chest as I grab his wrist, lifting his hand to my mouth. His eyes sparkle as he immediately pushes his fingers past my lips so I can lick them clean, then he drags his tongue along the back of his hand, leaving no drop behind.

“Scandal,” Luca whispers with a smile.

I huff out a breath and push him back, grabbing my shampoo.

But he just grabs it from me, putting a bunch in his hair as he takes over my shower.

“Get the fuck out of here.” I grab it back from him and he just squints at me through shampoo bubbles.

He takes his sweet ass time rinsing his hair, making sure to fling water and suds in my direction. I’m just about ready to get out and go shower in another stall when he finally finishes.

He observes me with his lips pressed together as he wraps his towel around his waist. I give him a questioning look as he points to his neck, while staring at mine.

Yeah… I can already feel the bite marks.

And as he turns around to exit the shower stall, I see the scratches all over his back.

The cheers and ribbing I hear as Luca returns to the locker room tells me everyone else sees them too.

I sigh, turning my face into the water.

With a bit of a smile…

Fucking Luca.

That drive was… eventful.

Just when I thought pop music couldn't get any worse, I get to hear both Luca and Seb singing along to it for four fucking hours.

I should have gone with Noah.

"*How* do you guys have the energy for this?" Adão asks, sharing my sentiments about this whole thing. "All I can think about is drinking some fucking water."

"Well, a little *MMMBop* helps get your mind off the dehydration." Luca nods seriously as we *finally* pull into the fight venue for weigh-in.

"It does something…" I mutter.

We make our way into the venue, and Max meets us at the entrance.

"You all going to make weight?" he asks.

Luca nods seriously. "I'm so dehydrated it's not even funny."

Max shakes his head at him with a wary look, and eyes the rest of us as we all nod. We've all been strict with our routine to cut weight so we can make our weight classes, which means we are also all eager to get this over with so we can rehydrate and refuel.

"Ok," Max gestures with his head behind him to the scales and officials. "Get weighed, then right to the hotel. Rest, hydrate and eat."

“Sounds like fucking *heaven*.” Seb practically drools and Adão nods eagerly.

I take a look around as we head over to the scales, my eyes quickly landing on Josh Hens. He’s leaning against a wall with his arms crossed, waiting to be weighed. And by the time I strip down to my fight shorts, he’s heading onto the scale.

“That your guy?” Adão asks.

I nod. “Yeah.”

Josh weighs in at 169 pounds, coming in under the upper limit of 170 for the welterweight class. He then flexes his arms in an obnoxious pose for the camera with a forced scowl on his face.

Luca snorts beside me. “He looks fun.”

Max shoves Luca forward. “Go.”

As Luca steps on the scale, I eye his opponent. Brad Eastin is standing at the side of the room talking with someone. Luca has the height advantage, and I suspect after gaining some weight back by tomorrow he’ll also have the weight advantage. He watches Luca as he makes weight for welterweight and gives him a courteous nod.

“Ty, you’re up.” Max pats my back.

I step onto the scale, and even though I know I’m good, I stare at the numbers as the official slides the weight along the beam.

“167.” The official nods to me, and I blow out a breath, nodding back to him.

Max hands me a bottle of water as I make it back to them, and I immediately open the cap to take a drink.

Fuck, that’s good.

“Ty Roscoe.”

I turn around to see Josh Hens standing behind me.

I give him a nod as I swallow my water.

“Should be a good fight tomorrow,” he says, crossing his arms. “I’ve been studying you.”

“Yeah,” I say with a nod, “same.”

He adopts a sly smile. “Really helps to know your opponent’s weaknesses, doesn’t it?”

I huff out a breath of amusement. *Does he think this is intimidating?* “That it does.”

He gives me a look up and down with a slight tilt of his head. “Well. See you tomorrow.” He then turns, and leaves.

“What the fuck, was that supposed to be his trash talk?” Luca asks, staring after him. “He should really work on that. Everyone knows that if you’re going to talk smack, you have to *commit*. Hit where it hurts. That was just more annoying than anything.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Who knew someone could be almost as annoying as you.”

Before Luca can respond to that, Max says, “He’s a fucking idiot. Just focus on the fight and ignore his ego.”

I nod. “Already done. I’ll deal with it all in the cage tomorrow. Let’s go.”

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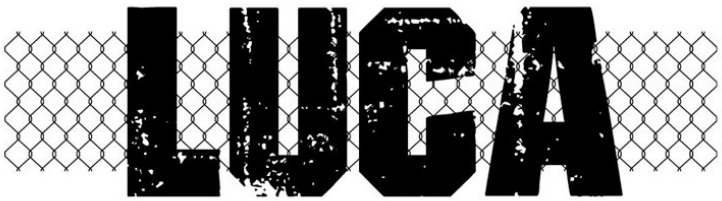
FORTY-ONE



"WE SHOULD WATCH A MOVIE," I say through a bite of pasta.

Ty just nods slowly, taking a drink of his coconut water. "Hm."

"What?" I narrow my eyes at him as he sits on the other bed in our hotel room. "It's 7:00. Are you just planning to sit in silence while you eat and hydrate for the next few hours? Is this the *Ty Roscoe way*? Do you, like, meditate or some shit?"

He rolls his eyes, taking a bite of his boring ass chicken and vegetables. "No. But your movies are fucking weird."

A smile spreads across my face. "Oh, but Tyler. I have an *epic* fight movie for us to watch."

His eyebrows lift with surprise and uncertainty. "Really…"

I nod seriously. "Mm-hm. I watch it before every fight." I hop off the bed to grab my laptop. "There are some sick fights in here that get me all fired up. It's my pre-fight ritual."

Ty watches as I set the laptop up on the bed he's sitting on. "Warrior?"

I shake my head. Even though that *is* an amazing MMA movie… that's not the one.

"Rocky?" he asks, eyeing me as I grab my pasta and coconut water from the other bed to sit next to him.

"Nope." I reach out to hit play on the laptop, and Mulan begins.

Ty sighs. "Another fucking cartoon."

"Oh, fuck off." I roll my eyes. "Mulan is a fucking *warrior* and has proven herself, through her ability to fight, as she was considered a disgrace to her family." I take another bite of my pasta. "It's empowering."

Ty is silent for a moment, and I can feel his eyes on me as I keep mine on the computer screen. Yeah… I like this movie because it kind of hits close to home. But also, because Mulan is just a straight up *badass.*

"Fine," Ty says, leaning back against the headboard.

"*Fine,"* I mock him, leaning back as well. But I smile widely. "I knew you liked animated movies."

He scoffs, shaking his head. "I don't."

"Bullshit."

"I *don't.*"

"You think they're magical."

"Says the guy wearing unicorn socks."

"Says the guy who *bought* unicorn socks."

"For *you*."

"Aw. So sweet."

"Fuck you."

"I wish," I say with a forceful sigh.

We're both silent for a moment, before taking another bite of our food. Fucking is unfortunately not in the cards for tonight. But after tomorrow… it'll be fuck city and my ass will be *ready.*

"So," I glance at him, "how do you feel about Josh Hall?"

"Hens," he says, "and whatever. He's an idiot, but I can manage him. I managed you for years, this is nothing."

I chuckle. "Yeah." I watch as Mulan tries to pour some tea, and it all goes terribly wrong. "He thinks he knows your weakness." I turn to look at him. "But he doesn't know about the tiger's punch."

The corner of his lips tilt up as he looks back at me. "Fast and deadly."

"Fast and deadly." I nod. "And, when you do win, we'll celebrate."

His eyes soften, as they drop briefly to my smile. He nods with a soft smile of his own. "Yeah." He then quickly switches back to work mode. "How are you feeling about Brad Eastin?"

"Good." I nod enthusiastically. "I'm hoping I can keep him up for most of it, but I'm feeling good for our fight on the ground. I'm not totally sure what I'm walking into with him, but that's ok. I'll be controlling this fight, no matter where it goes."

Ty nods, and I swear I see pride behind those dark eyes. "You will."

I smile at him, still in awe of where we are now, together. "LFA, here we come."

I bounce on my feet, shake my arms and blow out a breath.

The sounds from the crowd outside the room are quickly feeding my anticipation, and I am so fucking ready to do this.

“You got this, Luca!” Seb pats my back with a smile.

Everyone except me, Ty, and Elijah have already fought, and so far, we’re all wins.

“Bring us another win,” Rosa says with a big smile as she holds an ice pack to the side of her face. Her fight was fucking brutal, but as always, she dominated.

My eyes travel to Ty in the corner of the room, where he is sitting with the hood of his sweater up and his head down. He’s up after me, and he is in the fucking *zone*.

“Ready?” Max asks me.

I nod, tapping my gloves together in front of me. “Yup.”

But just as I’m about to walk out of our room to the cage, Ty looks up. His eyes drop to the tattoo on my ribs, and he gives me a little nod.

Moon and stars.

I nod back to him, then follow Max out of the room.

I let the lights and the roar from the crowd wash over me as I approach the cage, and the familiar sense of comfort and familiarity settles inside me. This is what I am meant to do. I am *made* for this. Even as the ref pats me down before I enter the cage, I am itching to get in there and get started. Especially after all the training I’ve done with Max and Ty. I am eager to put the next notch on my belt and prove I can be a complete fighter at an elite level.

The ref gives me the all clear, so I enter the cage and wait for Brad Eastin.

I watch him as he walks out with his coach, looking confident. I bounce on my feet to keep the energy flowing as I wait for him to enter the cage, shutting out everything around me and zeroing in on my opponent.

As he steps into the cage, he gives me a little nod, which I return.

The ref closes the cage door, moving to the middle of the octagon. He points to me. “Ready?”

I nod.

He points to Brad. “Ready?”

He nods.

“Begin.”

The anticipation in me settles, and I step into the middle of the octagon. Brad and I each hold our fists out to tap, and I enter my stance, settling into my comfort zone here in the cage. I’m locked in, determined, focused, and fucking *ready*.

Immediately, I can tell Brad wants to bring me to the ground. He ducks low, stepping towards me. But I keep the distance between us and step back. Brad tends to fight with his hands low, so I already knew going into this that I’d have opportunities for head shots. But I didn’t anticipate it would be this early. I kick, making contact with the side of his head.

He grunts and steps sideways as he loses his balance, so I step in and take him down to the floor. He wants me down here, so let’s fucking do it.

Brad quickly turns his body as I take him down, and manages to face away from me.

But I’m quicker.

My legs wrap around his waist from behind so I can control his hips, and I unleash a fury of punches to the side of his head. With his legs under my control, and my weight on his back keeping him from lifting his arms, I’m free to make the next move.

But I take a moment, landing a few more hits and elbows, as I make my plan.

Brad drops his head to bring his arm across his face, shielding it from my fist. And as he slips that arm under him, I know exactly what he’s going to do.

Instead of fighting against his desire to roll us over, I move with him, keeping control and putting myself and him in the position *I* want.

The anticipation rises again as I can see exactly where I want this to go.

He’s on his back now, and I’m on my knees between his legs. He lifts his leg to kick at me, but I grab it just as his foot makes contact with my ribs. My hand slides under his knee, and I spin, sitting on his hips with my back to his face. I grab his leg, hugging it tight to my chest, and lean to the side.

I feel him struggle against me, as he knows I have him in a kneebar. But God love him, he continues to try.

So I drop my shoulder to the floor, bring my arm under his calf to apply more pressure to that knee and just wait for him to tap.

And he does.

As we separate and I jump to my feet, my eyes land on Max at the side of the cage. He fist pumps the air and yells out to me, as my teammates cheer around him.

But then I see Ty leaning against the back wall, arms crossed with a small smile.

I give him a smirk and point to the sky.

Moon and stars, Tiger.

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FORTY-TWO

AS THE REF pats me down, I keep my eyes on Josh Hens.

He paces the opposite side of the cage, glaring at me.

“Stay focused on the fight,” Max says. “He’s just trying to intimidate you.”

I turn my head to Max. “Not working.”

He smiles and pats my back. “Good.”

“All clear.” The ref steps back and gestures for me to enter the cage. I climb the steps to the sound of my teammates cheering behind me, but before the cage door closes, I do something I’ve never done before.

I take a glance back, finding Luca. He nods to me with a slight smile, and I nod back to him.

As I turn away, I feel a sense of comfort, and I fall into my usual pre-fight routine again. I stretch my neck, hop on my feet a couple times, and block everything out. My senses sharpen and focus on the cage, and the cage only. The sounds of everything else fades away, and all that matters is this moment, this fight, this opportunity.

I blow out a breath and raise my eyes to the ref.

He glances between us. “Ready?” he asks, pointing to me, and I nod.

He turns to Hens. “Ready?”

“Fuck yeah.” He taps his gloves together with a sly smile.

“Begin.” The ref gestures to the middle of the octagon, and excitement rushes through me.

I step forward, raising my gloves, watching him do the same. I hold out my hand for him to tap, and he holds his right hand out as well. But he

immediately draws back with his left and clocks me on the unprotected side of my head.

I'm just about to step into this motherfucker and take him right to the fucking ground, when the ref steps in between us, a hand on each of our chests.

He glares at Hens. "You are aware I am in control of this fight, right?"

Hens huffs out a breath and nods.

"I'm not going to put up with any shit. You fight with respect, conduct your fighting and behavior within the rules, and we won't have any problems." The ref keeps his eyes on Hens.

"Yeah." Hens nods, staring at me. "Got it."

The ref looks at me, and I nod.

He steps back. "Begin."

I think of everything I've worked on over the past couple months, and prepare myself to be quick on my feet in case he pulls something like that again. But this time when I hold my hand out, he taps it.

He hops around me, then pivots and goes in the other direction. But I keep my eyes on him, and step in. He's trying to confuse me and get me to lose my bearings, so he can attack. Little does this fucker know, I'm used to that shit.

I swing my arm out for a left hook, just like he did to me, and catch him on the side of his head as he gets a little too cocky in his footwork.

Like Max said, his impulsiveness could work in my favor.

But that pisses him off, and he immediately barges into me. He lays a body shot to my ribs but I move back quickly and land a low kick to his thigh. And I can tell he feels it.

He looks fucking livid, but I'm about to make him even more angry.

I wait, knowing a kick is coming. And when it does, I grab his leg and take him down to the ground. The thump he makes when he goes down tells me he felt that too, and he quickly tries to sit up. But I move faster, into mount position, punching his head hard with both fists.

His forearms come up to block my hits, and he attempts to bridge his hips to roll us. He is trying to grab one of my arms to center it so he can roll, and once again, his impulsivity is working for me.

If he took a moment to think this through he would know that if he tried to roll us, I could move into back control. Which I do. And as this is an area of weakness for him, he's late to defend. With me behind him, and my legs

wrapped around his waist, I'm able to get my left arm around his neck. And just as I'm about to pull him into a choke, his hand reaches back to punch me, with fingers extended. And his finger goes *right* into my eye.

"Hey!" The ref yells, dropping down to separate us. "What did I say?"

The ref pushes Hens away from me, who just smirks. "Sorry, unintentional."

I rub my eye, blinking as I sit up.

"You good?" The ref asks.

I nod, standing. *Fucking asshole*. He knew I almost had him… and the fact he resorts to illegal moves, like a fucking *eye poke*, when he's going to lose is just fucking dirty.

The ref looks over my eye, which is thankfully ok, then turns to Hens. "Last warning. One more, you're disqualified. Got it?"

"Yes, sir." He bounces on his feet, staring at me.

The ref steps back and motions once again for us to begin.

There's under a minute left on the clock for this round, so I shift my focus to just doing as much damage as I can with what we have left. He taps my glove with a slight smirk, and I'm ready to wipe it the fuck off.

As the clock runs out, we stay on our feet, and I manage to get some good strikes on him. And he lands some on me as well.

The ref indicates the end of the round, and I head to my corner. Max immediately enters the cage and comes over to me.

"Jesus fucking Christ," he says, running his eyes over my face. "There's dirty and then there's Josh Hens."

I nod, keeping my eyes on Hens in his corner as he stares back at me.

"Hey."

I bring my eyes to Max's before me as the cutman applies more petroleum jelly to my swelling face.

"You almost had him," Max says. "Get him back to the ground. You know he's weakest when you have back control. He's not easy to take down, but once you get him there, you got him. And if he wants to get disqualified, that's on him and you can have the win. And as it stands right now, if it goes to scorecard, you're on top."

I nod, blowing out a breath.

"Ok." He glances behind him to Hens and back to me. "Fucking destroy him."

I nod again as Max leaves, and the ref calls us into the middle for round two.

“Fight clean, fight fair. Got it?” The ref says, looking between us. But his gaze lingers on Hens.

Hens nods, chewing his mouthguard before sliding it into place with a smile.

Fuck this asshole.

“Begin.”

Take him to the ground.

Fast and deadly.

I don’t even think as I duck and rush him, smashing into his waist and taking him down.

The roar of the crowd pushes through my focus, and sounds over the thump of his back hitting the floor.

It’s a frenzy of punches between us as we fight on the ground, but I’m controlling this. And I know that the second I get my leg over his waist, I’m going to have him in an armbar.

He manages to get a leg away from me, but I still have full control of his arm, even though I’m underneath him. He pulls his knee under him and gets on all fours.

And I’m aware of what he’s going to do.

He wants to land a knee to my head.

I push back to create more distance between us, causing him to push up onto his knees and lift his hands off the floor.

I briefly think I’m in the clear, as it’s illegal to knee if his hands are off the floor and I’m down.

But he’s dirty.

I see his knee coming and try to lift my head to avoid it.

But his knee lands on the back of my head.

And everything goes black.

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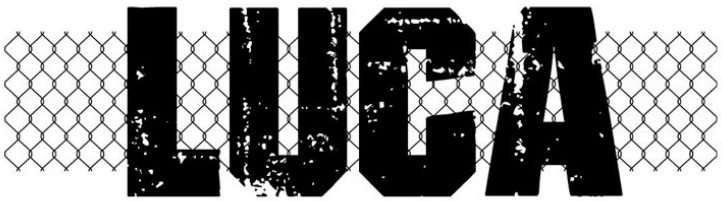
FORTY-THREE



MY LEG WON'T STOP BOUNCING as I chew my thumb nail, my eyes glued to the end of the hospital hallway.

Rosa slides her hand over my knee and squeezes gently.

I turn to look at her, dropping my hand from my mouth.

She smiles softly. "He's ok."

I nod, but the worry doesn't let up. I still don't know what's actually going on, since they kept Ty in the hospital overnight to assess and monitor him. All I know is that he has a concussion. But that knee, right to the back of his head…

Eventually, Max comes out of the room at the end of the hallway, and makes his way towards us. The entire team is here, and we all stand as he enters the waiting area.

"He's good to go home," he says, offering us all a small smile. "He's being referred to a doctor in St. Louis to be seen early this week, to further evaluate him and make sure we're not dealing with post-concussion syndrome, and to eliminate any risks of second impact syndrome." His eyes land on me. "It was a nasty blow to a vulnerable area… he needs the all clear before he resumes any kind of training."

I nod, glancing down the hall again to the room where Ty is.

Noah gently pats my back, and Max nudges me.

I reluctantly bring my eyes to him and he gives me a sympathetic smile. "He's going to be ok."

"And… his future in fighting, if…" Elijah asks tentatively.

Max shakes his head. "We'll deal with that *if* we need to."

We're all silent for a moment as that sinks in.

If his injury is severe… there's a possibility he could never fight again. I've seen blows like that, to the back of the head. Not many of those fighters return to the cage…

"He's not going to want everyone here, is he?" Max asks me.

I shake my head. "No."

"Ok." Max turns to Seb and Adão. "You guys can ride back with me."

Rosa wraps her arm around mine. "You going to be ok?"

"Yeah." I smile down at her. "We'll be fine."

She smiles back at me and moves in for a hug. "See you at home."

"He'll be down soon," Max says as Rosa lets go. "They're just going over everything with him. They said he's ok to sleep, so hopefully he'll get a good rest tonight."

"Sounds good, thanks," I say with a smile, trying not to look as worried as I feel.

"We'll see you Tuesday." Max then glances around to everyone. "No one is to step foot in the gym tomorrow. Complete rest day."

"Got it." Seb nods, then pats my back. "See you, bro."

"Tell Ty we're thinking of him," Noah says.

"Will do."

Everyone leaves, and I sit back down in my chair to wait for Ty. And my thoughts take me back to yesterday, just like they have been all night.

A replay of Josh Hens pulling yet another illegal move runs through my mind, as I see his knee going right for Ty's head. It felt like it was all happening in slow motion, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. And when I saw him fall to the floor, not moving as the ring doctor rushed into the cage, I was frozen. He didn't even look like himself when he came to, and they took him away.

And that was the last I saw him.

Until he steps out of the room at the end of the hallway, black hoodie pulled up over his head, and eyes down.

I stand, my heart pounding, as he makes his way down the hall towards me.

He stops before me, and when he lifts his eyes to mine, a rush of emotion takes over. His dark eyes are empty and sad. The life that we had put in them over the past couple months is gone.

I step towards him and wrap my arms around his neck, holding him tight against me.

His arms slowly lift to wrap around my back, as he momentarily lets himself feel what he needs to, and takes comfort from me. He grips me tight and drops his forehead to my shoulder.

But only for a moment.

His arms fall and he steps back, his eyes cast down once again.

“Everyone just left,” I say quietly. “But they’re all thinking of you.”

He nods, glancing towards the exit.

“Let’s go.” I take his bag from him, and we walk out to my Jeep in silence.

Ty stays quiet and looks out the window with his head turned away from me as I drive. He looks exhausted, so I don’t push, and wait for him to talk if he wants to.

But eventually, he falls asleep.

And I drive, in complete silence, for the three remaining hours. No music, nothing. Just the sound of the road and my thoughts, as I desperately try to keep them from wandering into the what ifs.

As I take the exit into St. Louis, I reach out and gently nudge him awake.

He opens his eyes and glances out the window.

“Hey, almost home,” I say as he sits up, and rubs his forehead. “Headache?”

“Kind of,” he mutters, adjusting in his seat.

He doesn’t say anything else as I take us through St. Louis, towards his place.

But as we get closer to his apartment, I glance at him again. “You got the win, you know. He was disqualified, so it goes to you.”

“Doesn’t matter,” he mumbles.

I sigh, knowing exactly how he’s feeling. I’d be feeling the same way. A win isn’t a win unless you earn it yourself. But, he did.

“It does matter. You really did win that fight, Ty. You were close to submitting him, and even if he didn’t, you had the points-”

“It doesn’t *matter*,” he says again with a slight shake of his head as he stares out the window.

“It *does*.” I nod as I turn into his neighborhood.

“Not if I can’t fight.”

The dread I’ve been fighting since yesterday settles in the pit of my stomach at that thought. But I’ve been pushing it away since then, and I’ll

continue to do so.

“You don’t know that.” I shrug one shoulder. “You could be back to training next week for all you know. You’ll get checked out by the doctor this week and then you’ll know-”

“If my life is over or not.” Ty nods. “I’ll know if everything I’ve worked for was taken away in one second because of some fucking asshole.”

I sigh. “You could be fine. You might just need a little bit of time off, but then you’ll get right back into it.”

“And if I do need time off, then I won’t be going to LFA.” He scoffs. “And it’s fucking stupid not to consider all possible outcomes and only think of the *positives*. Some fighters get hit like this and never fight again.” He’s quiet for a moment. “That could happen.”

The dread settles even deeper, and it’s getting harder to push it away.

I pull into the parking lot of his building and put my Jeep in park. I turn to him, but he doesn’t look at me. “We don’t know that yet. Yes, we can consider every possible outcome, but what good does that do? Just wait, and it might not even-”

“Just stop.”

“Stop what?” I ask, annoyance starting to take over. “Being reasonable?”

“No, *I’m* being reasonable.” He turns to face me. “You’re trying to tell me everything will be ok when it might not be.”

“Yeah, *might* not be.”

“Just shut the fuck up, Luca.” Ty closes his eyes and sighs, turning away from me again. “Just fucking stop.”

I bite my tongue so I don’t say anything else, even though I’m fucking pissed now. I know this isn’t him. I know he’s angry, upset and hurt… I would be too. I get it. But *fuck*. He’s also being arrogant, closed minded and *choosing* to focus on the negative when I could fucking help him.

So I can’t stay quiet.

“Fine.” I shrug. “Spiral for all I fucking care. But, when you realize that you have people here to help you, who care about you, you know where to find us.”

Ty doesn’t even look at me as he gets out of the Jeep. He walks around to the back, opens the door and pulls his bag out. He then slams it and walks into his building.

I sit and watch, knowing I should probably go with him. But I also know he doesn’t want me to.

I’m mad, he’s mad, and he feels like his whole world is falling apart.

I consider getting out and going after him, but I stop.

I’ll let him have tonight. But tomorrow, we fucking deal with this.

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FORTY-FOUR

“TY?” Bill looks up with surprise as I enter the garage.

“Hi.” I head right to my bay and drop my bag, getting ready to work.

“Um.” I hear him slowly approach me. “You were supposed to be off for four days… it’s only been two.”

I turn around to face him with a sigh. “Yeah. I see the doctor this afternoon so I’m here for the morning. I’m fine.”

He just nods slowly as he observes me for a moment. “Ok.” He pauses before tilting his head to the parking lot outside. “Oil change in spot three.”

I turn back to my bench. “On it.”

I hear him leave and release a breath, thankful he’s not pushing this. Because I just can’t do it anymore. I had two days of nothing. No work, no training… nothing. And I can’t keep sitting around, waiting for potential bad news. I feel like I can be here working, so that’s what I’m doing.

My mind needs to be busy.

I can’t fall into the trap. Into old habits… finding other things that make me feel better. Or make me feel numb.

I’d be lying if I said those thoughts didn’t occur to me.

As soon as I pull the car in and am raising it up on the lift, Tim and Jake come into the garage.

“Oh, hey…” Jake eyes me.

I nod to them and move under the car.

“How are you doing?” Tim asks, stepping closer. “I didn’t think you’d be back so soon.”

“Alright,” I say, draining the oil into the pan.

But I see them out of the corner of my eye as they exchange a glance.

And an agitated feeling settles in my chest.

“I said I’m fine,” I say sharply, and immediately regret it.

“Ok,” Jake says, nodding at me. “Glad to hear it. Uh… we’re here to help. If you want it…”

“I’m good,” I mutter, watching the oil drain.

As they head to their own bays, I close my eyes and sigh. I know I’m being an ass. And they don’t deserve that. I haven’t seen anyone in two days, since Luca dropped me off at home, and I’m letting all that frustration and anxiety come out. All those thoughts I’ve had about my MMA career ending, and what is going to happen next… they’re scaring me. Because this can’t all end. I need it. It’s who I am, and is the only reason I am standing here today with a job, goals, a sense of self… friends… someone I care about…

But without it, what will happen?

As I’m removing the filter, I hear Jake laugh. I glance over to see him joking around with Tim, a big smile on his face as he starts walking towards me.

“Want some coffee, Ty? I’m heading into the kitchen to make some.”

I shake my head and he just smiles with a nod, then he continues on to the kitchen.

I watch him leave, and disappointment takes over me.

These guys continued to be friendly and try to connect with me when I was an asshole to them. And everyone at the gym accepted me for what I was, when I tried so desperately to push them all away.

And even after everything they’ve all shown me, I’m doing it again.

Everyone went back to the gym yesterday, and I’ve been ignoring the strings of texts from both the group chat and to just me. I know they all just want to check in… but I can’t bring myself to admit how I’m really doing.

I’m a fucking mess.

And I don’t want anyone to see me like this.

I keep my head down and finish the oil change on this car, and reluctantly take a break before the next one. I feel a bit of a headache coming on, but I need to keep going.

My eyes land on my bag on my bench, and I sit on my stool, just staring at it.

As much as I want to keep everything and everyone out… there’s one person it’s been really hard to do that with.

As I take my phone out of my bag and turn it on, my heart rate picks up its pace.

I've been ignoring Luca. Every attempt he's made to see me, talk to me, help me… I've shut him out.

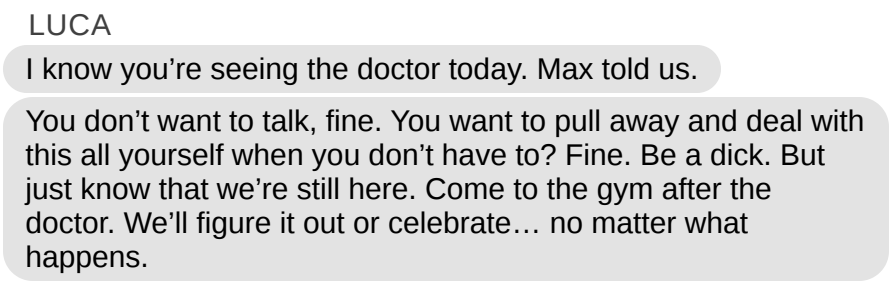
I don't want to bring him down with me.

My phone turns on, and I watch as the missed texts and phone call notifications roll in.

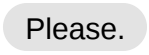
Max, Rosa, Noah, Adão… everyone.

And Luca.

I tap his name to read his text to me from this morning.


LUCA
I know you're seeing the doctor today. Max told us.
You don't want to talk, fine. You want to pull away and deal with this all yourself when you don't have to? Fine. Be a dick. But just know that we're still here. Come to the gym after the doctor. We'll figure it out or celebrate… no matter what happens.

My eyes land on his last text, and my chest tightens.



I stare down at his texts, and emotion swells.

I miss him.

But I just can't put him through this.

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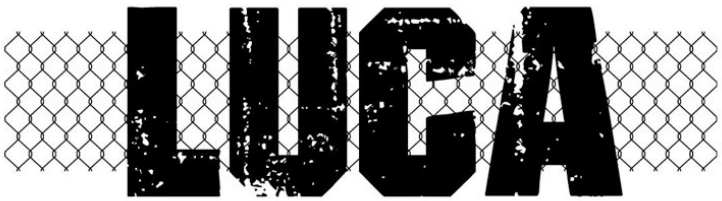
FORTY-FIVE



I LOOK at my phone one last time before yanking open the gym door. Still nothing.

And as pissed as I am, I also get it. I'd be a fucking hypocrite to think I wouldn't be acting out in my own way if I was facing what Ty was. I understand how difficult this is for him, to possibly lose everything he's worked so hard for, and everything that means so much to him.

I guess I just didn't think I was also going to be tossed away with it.

I thought maybe we were more than that.

As I enter the gym, I can't help but glance around, even though I know he's not here. But a part of me expects and hopes to see him running the track, warming up for a workout.

But it's quiet, and the only person I see is Max.

"Hey, Luca." He closes the glove locker. "You're here early."

"Yeah, I came right from work."

Max nods, observing me as my eyes continue to roam over the gym, searching for something that's clearly not here.

"Haven't heard from Ty?" Max asks.

I scoff. "No."

His brows draw together. "Not even after his appointment? It was hours ago… I was hoping you heard from him."

Worry settles as I look into Max's eyes, seeing the same emotion in them. "No…"

He steps towards me. "Maybe it was good news, so he went to work?"

"He probably would have come here…" I trail off, trying to think of what he would do if he received the all clear from the doctor. But I don't

know. Because he hasn't texted more than a single word to me in days, so I don't know what he's thinking.

Or maybe it was bad news and he's out there making some poor decisions right now.

"I'm going to go check his work, and home," I say, backing up towards the door and trying not to look as panicked as I feel.

Max nods. "Good idea. Want me to come with you?"

"No," I shake my head. "I'm good."

"Ok," he says, uncertainty lacing his tone. "Let me know."

"I will."

I turn around and head back out of the gym.

Fuck.

I should have been more forceful with him and made him deal with this. But he was pissing me off, so I gave him the space, hoping he would come around when we both cooled off.

As I pull into the parking lot of his work, I look around for his car. But I don't see it.

An older man at the desk in the main office looks up with a smile as I enter. "Hi, can I help you?"

"Hey," I say, turning my head as the door into the garage opens, and another guy comes in, laying some papers on the desk. "I'm Luca. I… train with Ty."

The guy at the desk smiles as his eyes roam over my bruised face. "I see that," he says with a light chuckle. "Nice to meet you. I'm Bill. This is Tim, one of our mechanics." He gestures to the other guy behind him.

"Is he here?" I ask, getting right into it, unable to exchange pleasantries right now.

Bill's brows draw together. "No, he left hours ago."

"So, he was here?" I ask, glancing between him and Tim.

Tim eyes me and steps forward, a worried look crossing his face.

"Yeah, he was working this morning," Bill says slowly.

My heart is pounding. "And he didn't come back?"

"Is he ok?" Tim asks.

"I don't know." I run a hand through my hair and look out into the garage. There's another guy out there working, and I see an empty space that must be Ty's.

“He wasn’t himself today,” Tim says, pulling my attention back to him. “Withdrawn, sharp… angry.”

I nod with a sigh. “I figured.”

“He’s dealing with a lot right now…” Bill says thoughtfully. “He was going to the doctor, right?”

“Yeah.” I nod. “Um… I’ll try him at home. Maybe he went there after.”

“Let us know if we can do anything. We’ll be here,” Bill says.

Tim nods seriously. “Anything.”

“Thanks.”

I head back out to my Jeep, the worry now taking over.

If it was good news, he would have either gone to work or the gym… right?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

When I get to his place, I immediately run up the stairs to his apartment and bang on the door.

“Ty! You in there?” I yell.

Nothing.

Fuck!

I bang again. “Ty!”

The door across the hall opens, and an older lady pokes her head out.

“Hey,” I say to her. “Have you seen the guy who lives here, at any time today?”

She shakes her head and retreats back into her apartment, looking scared.

And yeah, fair… a guy with a black eye is pounding on her neighbor’s door yelling for him.

“Sorry,” I mutter, and leave the poor woman alone.

I head back outside and walk to his parking spot to find it empty.

What the fuck?

I run a hand down my face, looking around as the sky darkens.

Where the fuck is he… What happened?

My head tilts back as I blow out a breath, and my eyes land on the moon.

A full moon, with the soft twinkling stars emerging around it.

A quiet space to go when you need to get away from it all…

I hop back in my Jeep, with a new sense of hope.

I know where he is.

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FORTY-SIX

I HEAR the sound of tires on the gravel behind me, but I keep my eyes up and on the stars.

A car door slams and footsteps approach me.

"What the fuck?"

I lower my eyes to see Luca standing before me, as I lay on the hood of my car. And even though it's dark, I can see that he is pissed.

And worried.

"It's fucking cold out here, what are you doing?" he asks, glaring at me.

I sit up so I can look at him. "Thinking."

"Thinking? *Thinking*? What the fuck, Ty?" he shouts, opening his arms wide. "Everyone is fucking worried about you. You don't talk to anyone for days, you apparently show up to work before you're supposed to and rip everyone's heads off, then you just disappear without telling anyone anything. No one knows where you are! I went to your work, your apartment, and nothing. Jesus fucking Christ!"

"Well, you found me," is all I can say as I take in just how angry and frazzled he looks. His words echo in my head as he just stares back at me. He went to my work, to my apartment… he went through a lot of effort to find me.

And that's all I can say…

He scoffs. "Yeah. I fucking did. And you don't seem to fucking care that everyone is stressed out over you."

My chest tightens at those words, as I know he's right. I didn't care, and I hate that. I didn't consider what everyone else would think or feel about

this, as I threw myself into my own misery and blocked everything and everyone out.

“I’ve been trying to give you your space, Ty. But this is enough.” Luca runs a hand through his hair, shaking his head. “I’ve been trying to help you, in whatever way you need or however I can, but I don’t know how to do it.” He drops his hand forcefully. “So, things suck, and you have some things to work through. But you don’t get to push me away, you fucking asshole. If you lose MMA, that doesn’t mean you have to lose me too.” He pauses for a moment, taking a big breath in. “I love you, you fucking idiot, even after this shit you’ve pulled. You’re not just MMA. You’re Tyler fucking Roscoe, a badass fucking tiger who no longer has to hunt alone at night. But you need to get it through your thick fucking skull that-”

“I love you, too.”

He stops and stares at me. Just when I think he’s not going to say anything, for once, he blurts out, “What?”

“You heard me,” I say, as his eyes narrow suspiciously.

“Did I?”

“I don’t know, did you?”

“You’re a dick.”

“We’ve established that.”

“Fuck you.”

“No, but what was it you said? You first.”

He doesn’t say anything, standing before me as I sit on the hood of my car.

“What happened?” he asks, his voice losing the edge he came here with.

I push myself off the car to stand before him. “I went to the doctor.”

He nods. “I’d fucking hope so. And?”

“I’m good.”

His eyes widen. “You’re good?”

“Yeah.”

“Like… no more head shit going on?” he asks, hope lacing his voice and his eyes brightening.

I nod. “I still have a concussion, but it’s healing as it should. No head contact in sparring for a month, but otherwise, at the end of this week, I can return to light training.” My lips tilt up at the look of complete shock on his face. I shrug. “So, yeah… no more head shit.”

Luca just continues to stare at me and eventually opens his arms wide, making a theatrical show of looking around us. “Then what the fuck are you doing out here!?”

“Like I said,” I sigh, “thinking.”

His arms drop dramatically to his sides. “About?”

“You, mostly.”

He sighs and closes his eyes. “You have got to get to the fucking point here.”

I observe him for a moment as he opens his eyes again. “I was scared.”

His features soften and he nods slightly.

“I was scared of losing MMA, and had a hard time coming to terms with the fact that it could happen. You know what it means to me. And I was scared of what would happen to me if I didn’t have it… I was scared of going back to my old life of drugs and bad decisions.” I take in a breath, and exhale. “And I was scared of losing you because of it.”

His brows draw together. “So you push me away. Sounds like a logical plan.”

“It wasn’t.” I shake my head. “I was an asshole. I was afraid, so I pushed everything away thinking it would somehow be easier… for me *and* you.”

“That’s not your call to make,” Luca says, an edge to his voice again. “You don’t get to make those decisions alone.”

“I know.” I nod, hating the hurt in his voice.

“You don’t get to just throw me away when you’re done, or when I’m too much for you.” He pauses for a moment. “Or not enough.”

It feels like a knife stabs my chest, as I realize what he’s saying. How he’s feeling.

And now I feel even worse.

I shake my head. “That’s not what I was doing. And… I’m sorry. I…” I sigh, “I don’t know how to do this. How to be with someone. But, I do want to. I want to be with you.”

Luca doesn’t say anything for a long moment. He chews his lip and exhales.

“Did you… fall into your trap?”

I sigh with a nod. “Yes.”

His eyes widen. “Ty…”

But I smile, and confusion takes over his features. I step into him, sliding a hand around his waist. “I’ve been high since I moved here. You’re one hell of a drug, Mitchell.”

His eyebrows raise slightly, and his eyes flick between mine. But before he can say anything, I capture his lips with mine.

He lifts his hands to the side of my face, pulling me closer. I kiss him with a fierce need. A need to never let him go, and to find my comfort with him. It’s more than just a kiss. It’s an apology for what I’ve put him through, and a thank you for staying with me. And a promise to continue fighting… *for* him, not against him.

He suddenly pushes me back, glaring at me.

“Don’t *ever* fucking do any of that shit again.”

I huff out a breath of amusement. “Fine.”

He cocks an eyebrow, and I see a small smile tugging at his lips. “*Fine*.”

I smile and tilt my head to the hood of my car.

He smirks slightly as he shakes his head, but he climbs up. I join him, laying on my back beside him, with my arm under my head.

We stay quiet, looking up at the stars and the moon, our breath visible before us in the cold winter air.

My eyes land on the moon, and I take in how bright it is.

The full moon.

Where light is born out of darkness.

I turn my head towards him, and he does the same.

As I look into his eyes, I feel comfortable and settled.

“Love you, fucker.”

He smiles, his eyes sparkling.

“Love you, asshole.”

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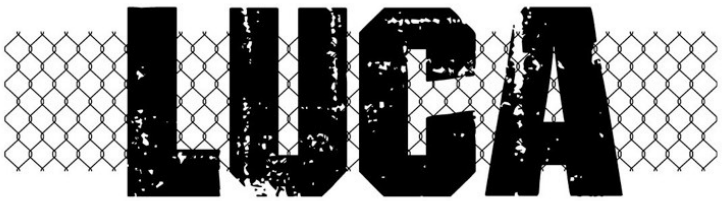
FORTY-SEVEN



MY EYES open to the smell of coffee, and an empty bed beside me.

It's also still fucking pitch black outside. Why can't he just sleep in for one fucking morning, ever.

With a sigh, I throw the covers back and get up, heading out to the kitchen in my boxers and magic socks.

Ty is standing in my kitchen, pouring coffee into two mugs. His dark hair is tousled from sleep, and the muscles of his bare torso flex perfectly with each movement he makes. After days of uncertainty and not knowing where he was… I take a moment to appreciate this sight. And let the comforting feeling wash over me.

But he's awake at an ungodly hour, so enough of that.

"So fucking early," I mutter as I make my way into the kitchen, and he passes me a mug.

"It's not, actually."

"It *is*."

"You work today, right?" Ty asks and takes a sip of his boring black coffee.

"Yeah," I say as I pour cream in mine.

"Then it's not."

"Oh fuck off, I still had like a half hour to sleep." I roll my eyes at him. "Even after everything I've taught you, you're still wound *so* tight."

He scoffs and tilts his head to the mountain of cookies and muffins on my counter, with a cocked eyebrow.

"Oh," I shake my head at him, "don't fucking even. That was all you, fucker."

A look of shame briefly enters his eyes, then he drops them quickly. “Yeah…”

I wince to myself, as I observe him. “I get it though,” I say, tilting my head to catch his eye again. “I would have done the same thing.”

Ty lifts his gaze to meet mine again. “I don’t think you would have.”

I nod. “I know I would be angry, pissed, scared, and who knows what else if that happened to me. Anyone would have.”

His eyes search mine for a moment before he nods softly.

I start to turn away from him to move to the couch, but he grabs my arm.

And as I look into his eyes, I see everything he wants to say, but can’t.

I know he feels bad about it all, and I know he cares. And I understand that he doesn’t know how to do this. As angry as I was when I found him last night, alone, when I had no idea what might have happened to him… I also know he needed the time and space to process and sort his feelings out.

He anticipates, plans, and never goes in blind to a fight.

And I can appreciate that he’s the same in love.

His eyes drop to my ribs, and he traces the stars with his finger.

“Moon and stars,” he says quietly.

I smile, stepping into him. “Moon and stars.”

I watch from my Jeep as Ty pulls into the parking lot at the gym. Once he’s parked, I hop out.

“Ty Roscoe, back in his natural habitat.”

He rolls his eyes and shoves his hands in his pockets. “Not really. I can’t even do any kind of workout yet.”

I shrug. “Yeah, but you’re here.”

He nods, and glances towards the gym. And I notice that he looks a lot more at ease compared to this morning in my kitchen.

“How was work?” I ask. “Even though you were technically supposed to take another day off…”

He brings his eyes back to me. “Good. Had a chance to talk to the guys. They understood.”

I nod with a soft smile. “They seem great.”

“Yeah.” Ty eyes me with a small smirk. “Jake invited me over for a barbecue this weekend.”

I gasp and my hand flies to my chest. “Tyler! You made a friend *all* on your own!”

He sighs. “Fuck you.”

“Ok.” I nod.

He sighs *again*. “He told me to bring my girlfriend, if I have one.”

“Oh?” I cock an eyebrow at him.

Ty just nods slowly. “So, this should be a fun surprise for him.”

I smile widely, and he smiles back.

We stand in silence for a moment longer, as I take in the brightness in his eyes.

“Tigers can’t purr.”

“What?”

“They can roar but they can’t purr.”

Ty just stares back at me, waiting for me to explain. But I don’t. Because tigers show that they are comfortable and feeling safe through their actions.

My Tiger does that too.

“Let’s go.” I turn and walk to the door, yanking it open.

As Ty walks into the gym behind me, every set of eyes finds him.

“Ty!” Rosa drops her weights and stares at him.

Seb throws his hands in the air. “You’re here!”

“Oh man, welcome back!” Adão smiles as he stops running the track.

I chuckle and turn my head to him. “Ohh you’re going to hate this attention, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Ty murmurs, as he eyes Rosa running towards him.

But I see the little smile tugging at his lips.

Rosa stops before him, looking up at him with bright eyes. “Welcome back! Oh my god, I’m so happy you’re here. How are you, are you ok?”

Everyone steps a bit closer, and Max gives Ty a cautious look.

Ty nods, looking around at everyone. “I need a couple more days off from training, and no head contact for a month but… I’m good.”

Rosa’s hands fly up to her mouth, and she looks like she’s about to burst with happiness.

“Sick, bro!” Elijah says with a huge smile.

“That’s awesome, Ty.” Noah smiles and pats him on the back.

Max steps forward. “And you have a plan to get checked out again before resuming training?”

Ty nods. “Yes.”

“And you will adhere to your doctor's plan to return to training, one hundred percent?”

“Yes.”

Max smiles. “Then it sounds like we have some planning to do.” He looks around to everyone. “Legacy Fighting Alliance… here we come.”

Everyone whoops and cheers, high-fiving Ty and celebrating him. Just like he deserves.

And he lets Rosa give him a hug.

Which is awkward as fuck, but… baby steps.

As everyone returns to their workouts, I turn to Ty, taking in the sparkle in his eye.

We take a moment, just for us, in this gym we call home. He smiles, and I nudge him with my shoulder.

“Let’s get ‘em, Tiger.”

The End… for now.

Book 2 coming late Spring 2024

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THANK YOU

Thank you so much for reading Hooks In! These boys didn't have to fight too hard for a spot in my heart, and I hope they got their hooks in you too.

I was so excited to write this book, as I have a serious love for MMA and combat sports. My brother is a professional MMA fighter, and my father is a boxer and a blackbelt in Taekwondo. So I grew up spending many days and nights in the gym hitting the bags, and guys way bigger than me, with my pink gloves. I still have those pink gloves, but they don't get as much use anymore. Instead, I now get to put this knowledge to use by writing about fighters falling in love. And my brother and my dad don't need to know this.

I want to send a big thank you to all of my Alpha, Beta and ARC readers! I love sharing this journey with all of you, and thank you so much for all your support!

Some special shoutouts:

Lisa – Forever my twin, I love your enthusiasm for literally anything I write. I credit you with the original idea for this book, as I remember us sitting on my couch when I was still writing my first ever book, and you said I needed to write a gritty rivals-to-lovers. We dreamed up an MMA rivals-to-lovers after we saw a weird video of car grappling, and here we are. We did it! Thank you for all the support, and so much love!

Kate – Always the one to calm me down and build me up. I'd probably still be agonizing over the first sentence I ever wrote if it wasn't for you. I live for your reactions to the sexy scenes, and the emotional ones… but mostly the sexy scenes. Thank you for always being there to bounce ideas off of and keep me on the right path. Forever logical, forever Callum. Love you!

Melissa – Thank you for continuing to join me on this journey! And for goat stickers! I'm so happy to have found another bookish friend, and to one share the love of MMA with! I'm so excited that we will finally get to meet IRL soon, you're stuck with me now!

Liza – I'm so happy to have met you! Thank you for increasing my wardrobe with duck sweaters and sending daily doses of adorable animals. You are definitely my people. Looking forward to working with you again on book 2!

And once again, thank you to every single one of you!

Moon and stars to you all… xo

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GLOSSARY

Striker – a fighter that is highly skilled in a standing and striking fight, often challenged when the fight is on the ground. Popular striking arts in MMA are boxing, Muay Thai, Karate, and Taekwondo

Grappler – a fighter who is highly skilled in ground control and grappling, and typically is challenged in a standing and striking fight. Popular grappling arts in MMA include wrestling, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu, and Judo

Complete fighter – a fighter who is well-versed and equally strong in all styles the sport of MMA is comprised of

Sparring – a form of training, and a simulation of a real fight without heavy blows

Rolling – sparring or drilling in grappling or Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu

Guard pass – getting past an opponent's guard position in grappling, and establishing a more dominant position

Sweep – a move to reverse a grappling position

Takedown – a move to off-balance an opponent, bringing them to the ground with the attacker landing on top

Slips – moving the body to evade an opponent's strike

Grappling positions:

Closed guard – a fighter holds an opponent by interlocking feet behind their back

Butterfly guard – the bottom fighter's feet are positioned on the inside of the top fighter's thighs to restrict their movement

Side control – a fighter restricts their opponent by lying across them perpendicularly

Mount position – a fighter is on top of their opponent with their legs wrapped around their body

High mount – a fighter is sitting on top of their opponent, over the sternum, with knees forcing opponent's arms away from their mid-section

Rear mount – a fighter is mounted on their opponent's back in such a way that they have control of their opponent

Back control – a fighter uses their feet and legs to restrict and control the movements of their opponent from the back. Commonly used to prevent escape, and to defend, sweep or attack. Also called hooks in

Submissions:

A fighter "taps out" or concedes to an opponent to end a match

Armbar – a fighter traps the opponent's arm, exerting pressure on the elbow joint in attempt to hyper-extend the opponent's elbow

Leg/kneebar – a fighter isolates the opponent's leg, putting pressure on their knee or ankle and pulling to hyperextend the limb

Rear naked choke – a fighter uses their arms to choke their opponent from behind

Triangle choke – a fighter uses their legs to encircle their opponent's neck and one arm

Strikes:

Hits, kicks and punches

Spinning back kick – a fighter steps forward, spins their body backwards, kicking at their opponent behind them

Front kick – a kick, or jab with the foot, in front of the fighter's body

Push kick – performed mostly with the back leg, to push an opponent back or off-balance

Left hook kick – sometimes called a roundhouse kick. A fighter lifts and moves their whole leg around their body before landing on their opponent

Straight punch – a powerful punch thrown with the rear/dominant hand

Jab – a fast punch in short range, often used defensively to keep an opponent from getting too close

Uppercut – a punch that begins low and travels upwards, typically aiming for the chin or upper abdomen/ribs of an opponent

Hook – a powerful punch performed by rotating the body and swinging the arm at a 90 degree angle into an opponent

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ALSO BY EVE HOLMES

Songs of Freedom

An MM Rockstar Romance trilogy

Book 1: Silhouette

Book 2: Details

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eve is an avid lover of coffee, getting lost in fictional worlds, crafting and ducks. She lives in a small town in Atlantic Canada with a bunch of animals and plans to get many more, much to her family and friends dismay.

When she's not trying to get ducks to love her, she can usually be found fantasizing about living in a treehouse, riding her horses, drawing and attending bookclub, which is basically just engaging in bookish shenanigans with her friends.

Eve enjoys a challenge, and will gladly turn the strangest writing prompt into a book. There's much more to come, we're just getting started!

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